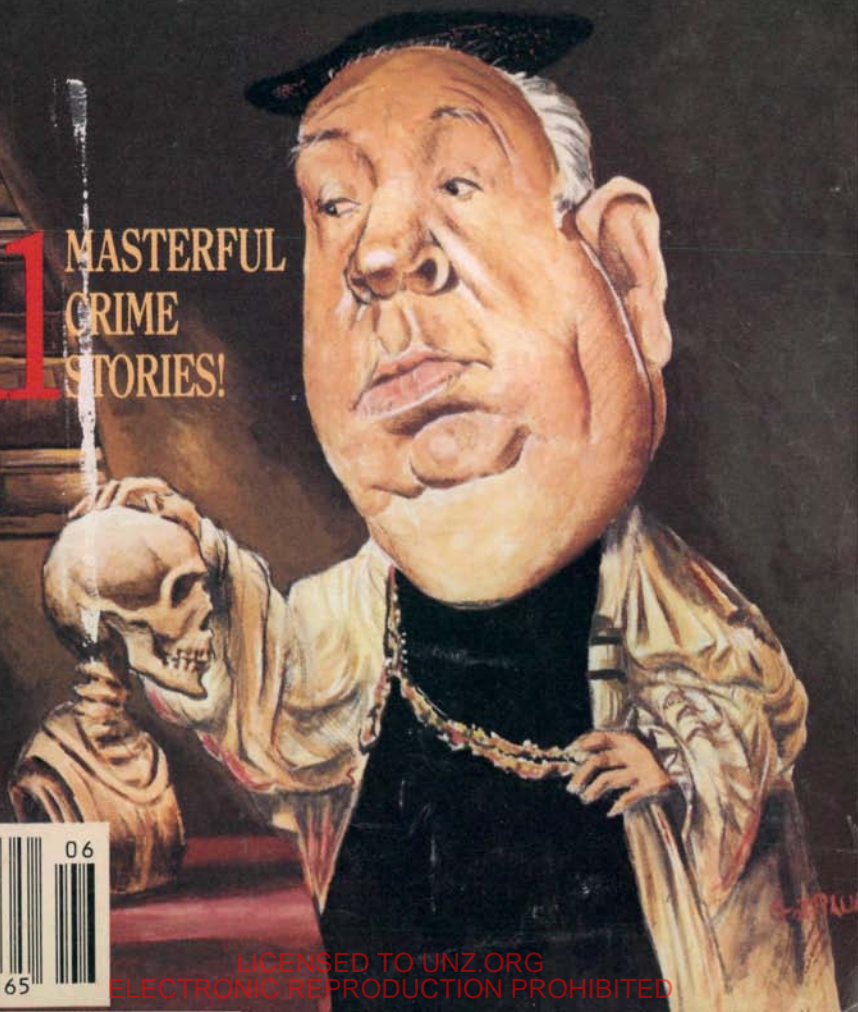


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MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Hard on the heels of last issue's Guest Editorial by Robert J. Randisi on the matter of what, in his own view, constitutes a private eye story (or novel) comes the following timely announcement from St. Martin's Press. With the Private Eye Writers of America (PWA), St. Martin's is sponsoring a contest for the best first private eye novel, with a guaranteed advance of \$10,000 and publication in both the U.S.A. (by St. Martin's) and in England (by Macmillan).

Anyone can enter—professional writers are eligible as well as beginning writers—as long as he has never published a private eye novel and is not currently under contract to do so with a publisher. A complete list of contest rules can be obtained from PWA/St. Martin's Press Contest, at either of the following addresses: P.O. Box 1930, Longwood, Florida 32750, or P.O. Box 1349, Sonoma, California 95476.

Entries must be postmarked by August 1, 1986.

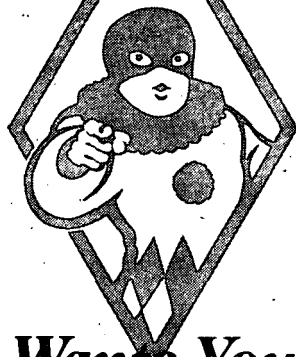
We are pleased, in this issue, to present two stories in partic-

ular—"The Beloved Object" by Arthur Porges and "Country Dance" by Clayton Matthews—because they are authored by two writers who go back a long way with us but with whom we've been out of touch for some years. Arthur Porges began writing for AHMM in 1959 and has had over fifty stories published in our pages. And Clayton Matthews appeared in AHMM in 1966 with the first of sixteen stories. In 1968 he introduced our readers to his series characters Sheriff Jason Little and Kyle, who are also back with us in "Country Dance."

The welcoming committee would also like to make special mention of three brand-new writers in this issue. We don't have a formal "Department of First Stories" as our sister magazine, EQMM, does, but if we did, both Fred Hamlin, author of "Arnold," and Jule Selbo, author of "Miss Nobody," would qualify. And Karen L. Todd, author of "A Grave Mistake," tells us this is her first *mystery* story to be published.

Finally, we would like to

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thank Mrs. Ardella M. Hageman for suggesting Wilbur Daniel Steele as a possible Mystery Classic author. It gave us the impetus to acquaint ourselves with many of his stories that we had not encountered before, and

it also gave us the difficult-but-pleasant job of choosing among several for the Mystery Classic slot. For a number of reasons we found we particularly liked "The Body of the Crime"—and, of course, hope you do, too.

Cathleen Jordan, Editor; **Lois Adams**, Managing Editor; **Brian Cox**, Editorial Assistant; **Ralph Rubino**, Art Director; **Gerry Hawkins**, Associate Art Director; **Ron Kuliner**, Art Editor; **Jean S. Weiss**, Associate Designer; **Nancy Siwinski**, Art Assistant; **Carl Barte**, Director of Manufacturing; **Carole Dixon**, Production Manager; **Valerie Bartlett**, Production Assistant; **Cynthia Manson**, Director, Subsidiary Rights; **Florence Eichin**, Manager, Contracts & Permissions; **Louise Mugar**, Circulation Director, Retail Marketing; **James R. Caulkins**, Circulation Planning Director; **Priscilla Garston**, Circulation Director, Subscriptions; **Irene Bozoki**, Classified Advertising Director; **Jamie Fillon**, Advertising Manager; **William F. Battista**, Advertising Director

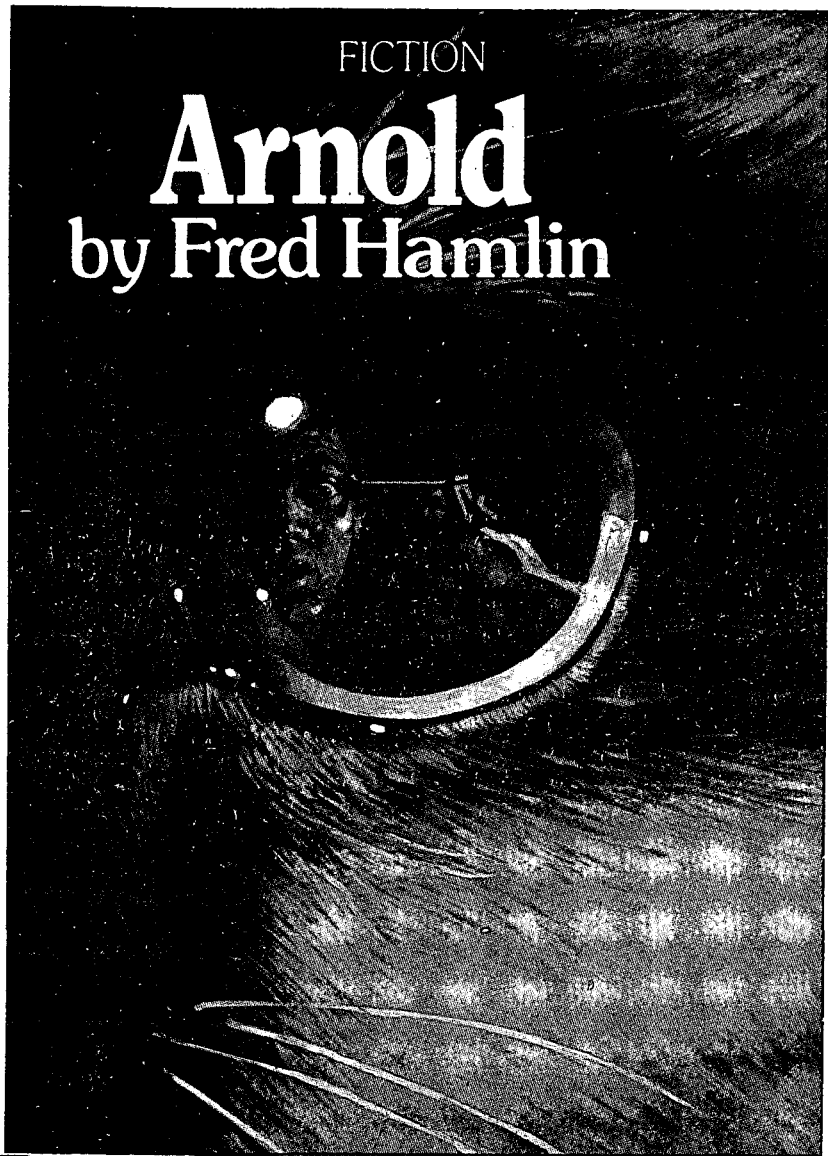
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Joel Davis, President & Publisher; **Leonard F. Pinto**, Vice President & General Manager; **Fred Edinger**, Vice President, Finance; **Paula Collins**, Vice President, Circulation.

FICTION

Arnold

by Fred Hamlin



I hear the first police car Saturday morning as I am driving back from the drugstore on an emergency run for aspirin and cat food. The aspirin is

for me. The cat food is for Arnold, who talks. He has trouble with consonants, and a distinct Siamese accent, but he definitely talks. His favorite word

Illustration by Ed Repka

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is "chaoowww" which helps to explain why Arnold weighs seventeen pounds, and why I am making an emergency run for cat food.

The aspirin is because the going away party held last night at our apartment building for Sam Archibald was a considerable success. It is a Southern California apartment building, which is to say two stories and U-shaped around a swimming pool, with two palm trees, a tropical name, and frequent parties. I moved in two years ago, right out of college. Sam's party was even noisier than most, and his last official act of residence was a front one-and-a-half off my balcony into the pool. In truth it was a one-and-three-eighths, but he had absorbed enough wine to come up laughing. Sam will be missed. In the meantime, my eyelids ache.

This condition fails to improve when the black-and-white goes by with siren in full shriek. I am relieved to discover that the sound isn't coming from inside my head, a possibility that must not be ruled out. When the second squad car goes by, I try the radio, but am only able to get a rock band that sounds in my present condition like a series of trays being dropped in a restaurant.

As I turn the corner two

blocks away from the apartment, I see both of the squad cars, plus two more, forming a rough roadblock between myself and my apartment building. I am waved to a stop.

"I'm sorry, sir, this street is temporarily closed to through traffic," says the officer. He has clear eyes, a thirty dollar haircut and military creases in his tailored uniform shirt.

Sir is not something I'm called very often, and it has a mildly palliative effect on my head.

"I live down at Tropical Towers. Apartment 24."

"Can I see your driver's license, please?"

I dig it out. "What seems to be the problem, officer?"

"An armed robbery at the Palm Paradise Savings and Loan. Witnesses saw the man headed this way. He shot a guard on his way out, so we know he's armed. The guard will live, but we have to be careful. We have the area sealed off."

"Does this mean I can't get to my apartment? I've got Arnold's breakfast, and he turns nasty if he misses a meal."

"Look, mister, I don't know Arnold, but nasty is what we're dealing with here. Our guy has a .44 revolver, armed and dangerous. Yes, you can go through, but be careful, and if you see anything strange, please call us

at once. The suspect is about five nine, medium weight. He's wearing jeans and a denim jacket, and had a black watch cap when last seen. Blond hair, thin face. He's also kind of jumpy, probably drugs of some kind. If you see anyone like that, don't take any chances. We'll be coming through to search the area in a few minutes. Here's your license. Remember, call us if you see anything."

I park my van in the regular spot and head up to the apartment, where Arnold is by now probably sitting by his dish yelling, "Naaoooww!" With luck he will not be venting his hostility by ripping the grass paper off the walls, a not uncommon form of protest on his part. If cats played football, Arnold would be Dick Butkus.

I open the apartment door and Arnold is hunkered down under the coffee table, with his ears flat against his head, and his tail twice normal size. His eyes look like a couple of solid onyx marbles.

"Knock it off, Arnold," I say, "you are overreacting. Food is forthcoming."

Arnold tends to be moody, no doubt due to kittenhood trauma. I agreed to keep him nine months ago when his former owner went over to Las Vegas for a weekend with her boy-

friend. They wound up getting married and she moved into his no-pets-no-kids apartment. I have had Arnold ever since. Neither Arnold nor I are sure who he belongs to. There is the depressing possibility that I belong to Arnold, which he tends to assume.

I put the bag with the cat food cans and aspirin down on the kitchen counter. The open sliding door to the balcony has aired out the worst of the cheap-wine-and-stale-smoke atmosphere that I woke up to. The Formica dinette table that came with the apartment is still littered with glasses from last night, none of which are clean. I dig out the aspirin and head for the bathroom off my bedroom where there may be a clean glass. Arnold glowers from under the coffee table and makes a noise like he's sucking his teeth. Only the noise comes from the bedroom.

I later recreate my thought process at this juncture. First, maybe Arnold does ventriloquism. Second, there probably isn't anyone in the bedroom. Third, even if there is someone in the bedroom it may be a leftover from last night's party—it was too late to check the closets before I went to bed. Fourth, and here's a great mind in high gear, *the cop on the corner said to call*. Ergo, the phone is in the

bedroom, and I have to go in there to call anyway. As I say, we gave Sam a significant party.

The first thing I notice when I go in the bedroom is not that there is anyone there. The first thing I notice is the gun. More specifically the open end of the barrel of the gun, which is level with and about three feet away from my left eye. Forty-four does not begin to describe it. It is more like looking into a railway tunnel that goes straight down, into which I am about to fall.

The railway tunnel shifts slightly, as if moved by a small earthquake, and the sense of vertigo eases somewhat. The gun is held by a pair of hands with white knuckles, and the hands are attached to a person. Give them credit, the police have a very accurate description. I can now add that he is about my age, mid-twenties, and has watery blue eyes and ears that stand out from his head, as if to keep the knit cap from falling over his face. There is something about the eyes that does not quite connect with reality. It occurs to me that Sam's eyes looked a bit like that when he started up to the balcony last night. This is not encouraging.

"Freeze. Don't move. Stay where you are." The voice is somewhere between a croak

and a quaver, and I am still not reassured.

He has not asked me to raise my hands, but it couldn't hurt, so I do. Actually, it is a sort of reflex action like the kid's trick where you press the backs of your hands against the inside of a door frame, and then your arms float up by themselves.

"One move, man, and you're wasted. I mean that."

"Okay. Take it easy. I see the gun."

"One move or one sound, dig it? I already wasted one guy today." His eyes are flicking all around the room, almost independently of each other, but one or the other manages to stay on me. He reaches around me and pushes the door nearly closed.

"What's going on out there?"

"There are a lot of cops in the neighborhood. They seem to be looking for somebody."

"You got it, man. How many of them?"

"I don't know. I saw four cars, but there may be more."

"Too many, man, too many. I shouldn't have wasted that guy."

He is shifting from one foot to the other, and the eyes are still doing the pinwheel routine.

"Gotta think, man, gotta be cool. Hey, is this the only phone in here?"

"The only one. It's on an answering machine right now, so

anybody who calls gets a message that I'm out."

"That's cool. No, wait, man, pull the plug on it. Pull the jack."

"If I do that and somebody I know calls, they'll know something's wrong. I always leave the machine on when I'm out."

"Yeah, man, stay away from that jack or I'll blow you away."

I am aware of a slight noise and movement behind me, and my new pal crab-hops to one side and drops into a firing crouch with the gun on the door, which is slowly opening. Sweat pops out on his forehead so suddenly you can almost hear it squeak, and his eyes more or less manage to focus on the doorway.

It's Arnold, and we resume breathing. Arnold strolls over and gives the guy's leg a long affectionate rub. Because he is leaning on the guy's leg, the kick he gets in return lacks real force.

"Goddam cat."

"Cloowwn," says Arnold and dives under the bed. Arnold has not yet learned how to swear convincingly.

The gun is back in my direction again.

"Is there a back way outta here?"

"Not really. Just the front door and the balcony, and that's one floor up."

"I gotta get outta here, dig?"

Needless to say, I am in favor of this, but no suggestions immediately come to mind.

At this point we hear official-sounding footsteps coming up the stairs out front, and shortly a heavy rap on the first apartment door; mine is the third one along. We both figure out what is happening at the same time.

"Okay, dig. When those guys get here you don't know nothing. You seen nobody. I stay here in the bedroom, but the gun is on you all the time. If you try anything funny, you're wasted. If I go down, you go down. Dig it?"

I nod, and we can both hear them move to the second apartment and bang on the door. From there it's close enough to hear them calling into the apartment. "Open up, police."

The foot-to-foot hopping starts up again, and the eyes are slipping in all directions. I am contemplating how large the end of the gun barrel looks, and imagine a hole that size in my back. I do not find this a pleasant fantasy.

"Okay, man, get out there and get rid of them. Fast."

I walk into the living room. The bedroom door is on a wall that runs front-to-back in the apartment, and the door swings into the bedroom. He leaves this open about two inches and

is standing a foot or so back, next to the wall. He can't be seen, and like they say at the National Guard meetings, his field of fire is unimpaired.

I hear the footsteps and the banging on my door.

"Open up, police."

It is the same cop I talked to down at the barricade, and he remembers me. He has a partner with him who goes to the same barber.

"Hello again. We're checking the neighborhood. I don't suppose you've seen anything since you got back."

"I've seen nobody," I say, having my lines down pat, "and I'll give you a call if I do. Have a nice day."

"That must be Arnold," the cop says, remembering the name, and at about the same time I feel a familiar rubbing on my ankle.

This is not good news. First, Arnold could not have fit through the two inch gap. Ergo, the door is open wider than it was, which means that the cop may be able to see into the bedroom. It also means that my pal back there has a bigger gap to shoot through. A trickle of sweat starts down my spine. It will no doubt stain a perfect bull's-eye on the back of my shirt.

The cop is bent over scratching Arnold's ears. "Did you get your breakfast, big fellow?"

"Nooooooo," says Arnold.

"Arnold," I say, "shut up."

Arnold has rolled over on his back and is getting his stomach rubbed. He is smirking.

"He looks like an Arnold," says the cop. "Palmer, maybe. Or Schwarzenegger."

"Benedict," I say. "Look, don't let me hold you up. I know you want to get your man."

"Right. Remember, call if you see anything unusual. We should be through the neighborhood in a couple of hours. We'll find him. But be careful till we do."

I close the door and look around, but Arnold is out of retaliation range under the coffee table. He is looking smug. The bedroom door swings open and my pal comes out.

"You did fine, man, but that cat almost got you killed. And those cops, too. I already wasted one guy."

I don't need to be reminded.

"Listen, maybe the guy isn't dead. Maybe this isn't as bad as you think it is."

"With this piece?" He is waving the gun in my face. "Man, this piece don't make mistakes, and I popped him twice."

I am looking down the barrel again and decide not to press the point.

"You got a car, man?"

"Right. If you would like to borrow it, the keys are right

here in my pocket. You could be on your way and . . .”

“Do I look stupid, man? I take your car and you’re on the phone the minute I’m out the door.”

“So tie me up before you go. Put a gag in my mouth.” I am not into bondage as a general rule, but there are always exceptions.

“No, man. I got a better idea. The cop said they would be through the neighborhood in a couple of hours, right? Okay, you and me we just sit tight here until they get it done. Then we both get in your car and just ease out of here. What kind of car you got?”

“It’s a VW van.”

“Okay, when we drive out of here I’m on the floor in the back and the gun is right behind your spine, dig? And if we run into anyone on the way to the van, the gun is in your neck. That way if we run into any cops they can’t shoot without hitting you.” His eyes have escalated from pinwheel to Roman candle. He is thinking very hard.

I am in no way enamored of his train of thought.

“So then what happens?”

“If everything stays cool, everything stays cool. I got no argument with you, man. You got rid of the cop. I could probably just let you go after a while.”

It occurs to me that “probably” is a key word in this sentence. I am not sure I want to know what alternatives are under consideration.

Still, we now have an agenda and the atmosphere is marginally less tense. The eyes are back to low-grade shifty, and I remember where this whole mess started. I realize I am still holding the aspirin bottle.

“Would you like an aspirin?” I ask. “I could sure use one myself.”

“No thanks, man,” he says. “I’ve got my own stuff.”

He digs a handful of miscellaneous capsules out of his pocket and swallows them and then follows me into the bathroom. I manage four aspirin, a dosage which seems appropriate.

“Do you mind if I feed the cat? He hasn’t eaten since last night.”

“Okay, man, but stay away from that window. And nothing cute.” The eyes are speeding up again, and the movements are jerkier.

The phone rings, and he bounces about eight inches into the air. The answering machine kicks in.

“This is Arnold,” my taped message says, “and the guy I live with is out right now. If you will leave your number at the tone . . .”

It gets no further than this

because my visitor has ripped the jack out of the wall. When he turns back, the gun hand is downright shaky.

"One more trick like that, man, you're dead." I sense that a logical explanation may not help the situation, and also that the glue that is holding him together has begun to melt.

We proceed to the kitchen area with the gun acting as a sort of hyphen between us. He comes past the dinette table and stops at the counter that divides the cooking area from the small dining space. I go around the counter and dig out a can of cat food, stick it in the electric can opener, and push the lever down.

This sound is to Arnold as the bell is to Pavlov's pup. He is out of the living room in full feeding frenzy and leaps for the kitchen table on his way to the counter. He realizes too late that the glassware from last night is in the way, and his claws scrabble desperately for traction on the slick Formica.

"Whoa-oowwww," he yells, which is promptly drowned out by a blast of crashing glass.

This in turn is drowned out

by the thunderclap of the .44 as my house guest spins and unloads a couple of rounds at the empty air behind him.

By the time he turns back to where I was, I am through the sliding door and airborne over the railing. I hear two more shots before I hit the pool. Sensing a disturbance, the cops are through the front door of my apartment with guns drawn before I come up for air. My houseguest is still trying to figure out what happened. He has also emptied his gun.

A neighbor later tells me my form was better than Sam's, but that I lost points on degree of difficulty. I attribute this to inadequate planning and preparation and consider it a moral victory.

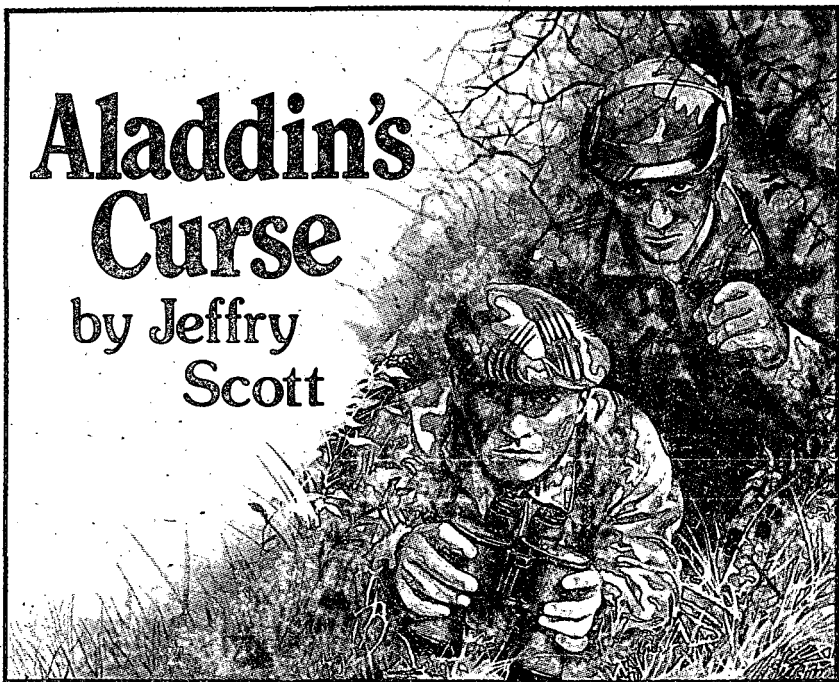
It's another hour or so before all of the questions are answered and the dust has settled and the cops have hauled their guy away. I get into dry clothes and the first order of business is to get Arnold fed. Fair is fair.

"Sorry for the delay, Arnold. It's been a busy morning."

"Srrrrrrrrrrrrre," he says. If there's anything I can't stand, it's a sarcastic cat.

Aladdin's Curse

by Jeffry
Scott



“It ain’t never oughta have gone down that way,” Steve Roback muttered. The darker his mood, the more cheerfully he mangled grammar—the day after Artie Clinch’s murder, mood and syntax were in terrible shape. The hangover didn’t help, either.

“Don’t take it so hard,” Bob Mallard advised. The young Englishman was gruffly sympathetic. “You and Clinch were pals, eh?”

Harsh face slick with sweat, Roback squinted in irritation but didn’t waste breath putting

the fool right. He’d known Artie Clinch was all. What it was, Roback *detested* mysteries. Baflement of any kind—paperback whodunits, Rubik cubes, crosswords, cute riddles offended him at the best of times. This was no such period, not hardly. Unsolved stuff just might kill a person in the long run and death—his own, anyway—had no place in Steve Roback’s game plan.

He grinned sourly because this wasn’t a game. Steve Roback’s stock joke, when asked his trade, was to respond, “Why,

I'm a merc, I guess, only I ain't no car." *Soldier of fortune* struck him as too fancy a label. He and Bob Mallard and a score more of their kind currently employed in Luambi province were professionals who'd be in a lot of trouble if the world ever ran out of wars. . . .

Mallard, misunderstanding the stocky man's restlessness, bobbed his head nervously and murmured, "Hot."

Roback wanted to snarl that Africa tended to be that way. Even a couple of hours after sundown this battered suite on an upper floor of the New Freedom Hotel came on like a halfhearted sauna. Worms of rust from bygone condensation proved that the air conditioning unit had been dead a long while. Like the mummified bugs lost in the grimy shag rugs. Of course Roback wasn't paying for the place. Colonel Julian Mkere had commandeered the New Freedom as barracks for his hired hands, so one couldn't expect finer nuances of service. As a matter of fact, paying guests suffered as well.

Or rather, they didn't, because the diplomats and salesmen and civil servants had been staying away from Gadaville and Luambi province in general. Colonel Mkere's coup was hardly a month old and very prudently they were waiting to

discover whether it would stick.

Cracking his knuckles—Bob Mallard started at the minor noise, hand jerking in reflex to pistol butt, they were all jumpy—Steve Roback told himself that was the core of his worries.

The trouble lay in his being (though the very word made him squirm) a warrior. *And this wasn't a war.* With combat a man knew where he stood, sort of. Lay flat on his belly more likely, taking incoming fire, but at least it was simple. You won and picked up the bonus. You lost and grabbed the nearest jeep, or better yet, light plane, in the traditional cause of putting the border behind you.

Colonel Julian Mkere was a soldier who'd won a victory without fighting. In Luambi province he controlled, however briefly, a piece of land about the size of the average state park. He couldn't hold it long, despite owning the local troops while the Gadaville police were run by a friendly member of the same tribe and the ruling (not to mention only) political party's militia happened to be led by his first cousin.

On the other hand, Colonel Mkere didn't need to hold the province for a lifetime, even a Third World rebel's lifetime. Luambi province had a dia-

mond mine. More to the point, the coffee crop's railhead was in Gadaville and coffee was the nation's brown gold, its economic plasma.

Central government could crush him—providing not too many of their forces changed sides or ran away—but Gadaville was bound to be trashed in the process, and the country's trade artery along with it. So Colonel Mkere, suave crook and budding politician (ignorant Roback thought them the same thing), was playing wait-and-see with his recent masters back in the capital, two hundred miles away.

Mkere was ensuring a fat pot whichever way the cards fell, by systematically if quietly plundering the province meanwhile. The snag over that was safeguarding his loot before spiriting it out to Zurich, Lichtenstein, or wherever. "Who shall guard the guardians?" had been an agonizing question centuries before the Romans immortalized it, centuries ago. For Colonel Mkere the answer came down to the likes of Steve Roback.

But not Artie Clinch, any more. Because Clinch had been murdered. Roback growled and shook his head. Mercs didn't get murdered, they got dead, killed in action. Price of the profession, right? Only this wasn't

war so Artie Clinch had been . . . yep, murdered.

"He never stood a chance," Bob Mallard agreed, reading the other man's expression. "They were using *pangās*, of course—I hate those blasted machetes. Hell of a way to go."

Roback stared at him, pokerfaced. The Brit was wrong on every count. Dead was dead, there was no good way. And Artie Clinch had stood a chance . . . or should have. He'd been a bragger but he had grit, and he'd never so much as crossed a Gadaville street unarmed. Yet three assassins had gone up against him with cleavers and Clinch hadn't even pulled his sidearm. Weird, spelt fishy.

Mallard broke in with anxious sincerity, "Look, I did my best. If I'd walked out of that bar one minute earlier . . . Lord, it makes you think! But I didn't. Soon as I spotted those thugs attacking one of our fellows, I fired in the air and they ran for their lives."

"It's not that," Roback assured him without explaining further.

He was musing that Artie Clinch had gone to violent death with a Browning 9mm. automatic untouched in his shoulder rig. Fully loaded, thirteen shots. Clinch had no patience with the warning about full

loads eventually weakening the magazine feed-spring and causing jams. The piece hadn't jammed, he'd never pulled it. Steve Roback had worked the action and checked the magazine afterwards, in angry disbelief transforming into blind anger. There was nothing amiss with the Browning.

More than a dozen shots waiting for three attackers who couldn't shoot back; and Clinch was good with handguns, could hit what he pointed at. So why had he made no attempt? The enigma was driving Roback crazy. "I'd love to know who put the contract out on him," he thought aloud.

"You're joking," Bob Mallard exclaimed. "They weren't hired by anyone, bet you a hundred quid. They were ragged, starved—just a street gang, the city's infested with them. Old Clinch walked into them, end of story. And him, R.I.P."

Mallard's certainty was impressive. The youngster might be a green merc, but he'd been born and raised on the continent and could read Gadaville's human fine print easily as a Manhattan straphanger scans a tabloid. If Bob Mallard believed that the killing had been random savagery, he was probably correct.

Which deepened the mystery instead of clearing it. Artie

Clinch wasn't the man to submit tamely to slaughter by amateurs. Roback frowned, making the mental amendment that it hadn't been wholly tame. Clinch's fighting knife was dropped near the corpse, and Roback felt sure the blood on it came from at least one attacker.

Say they'd had the drop on Artie Clinch, then . . . No, that didn't play, Steve Roback objected. Failing to draw a gun, under threat, yet pitting a single blade against three machetes—that was lunatic, suicidal.

"Contract?" Bob Mallard picked up belatedly. "Why would anyone pay to have hi—" The question ended in a yelp when his shin was kicked.

"Keep your voice down!" Roback yanked the door open. Frantic rustling erupted as light fanned into the corridor. But it was safely empty, clear of eavesdroppers. He'd disturbed only a party of giant cockroaches foraging over a room service trolley that had stood abandoned near the elevator ever since he had been in-country.

Colonel Julian Mkere wasn't a trusting fellow. His so-called Investigation Unit was staffed by scowling men from his home township and what they investigated was disloyalty to their boss.

Slamming the door, Steve Roback explained, "Artie sold his services but he didn't always stay sold—great guy for playing both ends against the middle. Always looking for the big score." He was recalling his final conversation with Artie Clinch, who'd been seething with excitement when he babbled of Aladdin's Cave.

"My hunch," said Roback, "is he ripped off something belonging to Colonel M., and it got him terminated."

Rubbing his leg, Bob Mallard guffawed, "Only a Yank could think *that up* . . . we're a long way from Chicago. Come on, Steve, if Colonel Julian wanted Artie dead, he'd have had him executed."

"Maybe not, kid. We ain't no band of brothers, all for one and so forth, but bump one of us off and the rest get edgy, kinda hostile and disturbed."

Mallard was unconvinced. "They weren't hit men," he pointed out, "they were displaced farm workers, plantation hands, ragged scum. Colonel Mkere would send Investigation Unit thugs—think I couldn't recognize that breed, even on a dark night?" He popped another can of beer. "Anyway, Clinch was well in with Colonel Julian."

"Huh?"

"Artie was drawing special

pay for some duty at the airport, hush-hush stuff. Obviously Colonel Julian wants his personal getaway plane all fettled up and ready to go when needed, and *not* to go off with a loud bang at six thousand feet. Can't blame the chap." He chuckled heartlessly.

"Run that by me again," Roback demanded. The headache had worked down to his boots, now. Sustained thought did it every time. But he kept his tone casual.

"Oh, I forgot you've been up-country lately. Yes, Artie Clinch had been a fixture at the airport for days. Didn't he tell you?"

Abstracted, Roback mumbled, "Maybe he did." *Aladdin's Cave*.

Bob Mallard added resentfully, "I should have had that little plum. *I'm* the pilot. Speak no ill of the dead, but Artie didn't know a trim-tab from a cabin ashtray, so how could he do proper checks on Mkere's plane?"

How, Steve Roback wondered almost affectionately, could somebody otherwise bright, be so dumb? Colonel Mkere's personal Lear jet had a team of highly paid and closely watched line mechanics. In Luambi province, locating surprise packages of plastic explosive nestling among the hydraulics or hidden in an engine shell

was near the top of their priority list.

Therefore Clinch had been sent to the airport for some other purpose. Snarling at Bob Mallard to be quiet, Roback clasped his head, willing recall of the recent past. Mallard thought that Roback looked uncannily like a hairless ape posing for Rodin's statue of The Thinker but wisely kept the fancy to himself.

Artie Clinch had given Roback a ride back from the airport on the night of his death. Steve Roback assumed that Clinch was there by chance, had been picking up mail or running an errand. Roback had been bone-weary after a day on his feet capped by a couple of hours' bouncing around in an ancient Cessna two-seater.

What the *hell* had Artie said? Roback groaned, teeth gritting. What with fatigue and hanging on while the jeep bounced from rut to pothole on the neglected highway to Gadaville, he hadn't listened closely. Also, Artie Clinch loved running his mouth and sounded crazier than usual, talking in riddles, taunting.

"Aladdin's Cave, you sorry ol' mud marine! How'd you like to run inventory on that, huh? Heft gold bars like pumpin' iron, trickle diamonds through your fingers like . . . um . . . goddam dried peas." Well, that was Ar-

tie Clinch. He'd been the same from Angola to Central America, forever drooling over fantasies of treasure. With some men it was sex. Roback always dismissed such doodling as childish, pointless. But supposing — his heart flickered, his mouth dried — supposing Clinch's dream had come true?

Tense and subdued, Bob Mallard whined, "I'm not sure this is a terribly good idea, one way and another."

"Don't talk, watch," Steve Roback commanded. They were sharing a thorn bush and fold of the baked ground beside a disused blind-landing beacon at the airport. The cover was hardly enough for a single observer ("We're not even married," Mallard had quipped hours earlier, before jokes dwindled away) and in order to reach it unobserved, they'd been there since long before dawn.

Wretched Bob Mallard didn't agree, but he had to be there. Should they be caught, there was an outside-edge chance of selling guards the story that Mallard had dropped his watch while walking back from his spotter plane the previous day, and was looking for it. Roback had to be there because only he knew what to seek. When he saw it, he'd know.

"I'm dying," Mallard confided. "In fact, I died this morning. This is hell. Curled up on a griddle with your toe in my ribs. Hell is hour upon hour of damn-fool, gratuitous peril in the company of an insane and terminally terse lout. I wonder who that might be?"

Roback didn't rise to the insult. The thorn bush was perhaps half a mile from the terminal block, slightly less from the maintenance and freight sheds. That was another reason for Mallard's presence: Roback couldn't keep tabs on locations in opposite directions—not without constant wriggings around, and undue movement would invite attention.

"You'll die," he promised, "if you run your mouth and miss something."

Roback was watching the passenger terminal. A lot of internal flights had ceased with Colonel Mkere's coup, so little was happening there. A group of soldiers drowsed in the shadow cast by an armored half-track. On the flat roof above the entrance, a listless merc sat in a beach chair, rifle across his knees, binoculars unused since a token sweep of the terrain when arriving on post. Steve Roback was irked by an illogical urge to double over there and ream the guy out.

Bob Mallard was responsible for the other set of buildings. Partly through being a flier who should spot unusual activity, mainly because Roback guessed the terminal offices with their safes had to be the likeliest place for valuables. He had pumped a few fellow mercs about Artie Clinch's new duty at the airport, but they'd proved vague and uninterested and he dared not persist. One whiff of possible plunder and there'd be a stampede . . .

Mallard's voice altered suddenly. "Head up, Steve!"

Turning laboriously, Roback was ready to clobber him for a hoax. Then he saw a pair of vertical, fat, black hairs rising in the shimmering heat above distant paving.

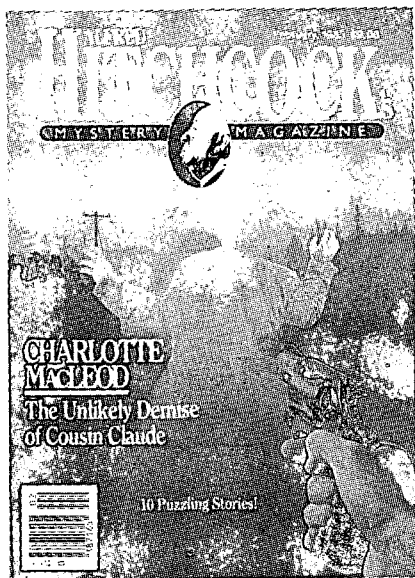
"Fuel bunker doors," Bob Mallard reported. "Normally they lie flat, trapdoor style."

Big deal, Roback grumbled inwardly.

"Take a bit of interest," the pilot nagged. "Why open the doors, eh? Hell of a sweat, a couple of horny-handed toilers have been cranking away for ten minutes—no power out—there these days, has to be done manually and those doors are steel, weight-supporting in case a plane rolls over them when they're flat."

"What is this bunker?"

"Fuel, it's just an under-



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ground tank, a chamber." Mallard was thoughtful. "Funny thing is, there's no aircraft waiting for fuel and you don't need those doors for that anyway. I'm pretty sure it's empty for that matter, never been used in my time here."

Roback's skin tingled. An underground space with steel doors—that was another way of saying "vault." And the bunker was out of sight of the terminal building, whose windows were frosted at the back, while it was out to one side and well away from the maintenance facility.

Mallard said, "Come to think of it, trucks have been stopping over there from time to time. Delivering something? What's going on?"

Before Roback could answer, both men flattened at the noise of an approaching convoy: motorcycles, jeep, and plain van, pulling up at the bunker. Delivering a human fence of men in civilian uniforms of baggy linen pants, dark blazers, and two-tone shoes, deploying to surround the gaping doors.

Mallard ducked, groaning, "Bad news, those are Investigation Unit goons!"

Pinning him down with a meaty paw between the shoulderblades, Roback watched figures emerging from underground—two Investigation Unit men, a province militia officer

in dandyish tunic and slacks the color of milky coffee, and a mercenary whom he knew only by sight.

The four men were undressing. Investigation Unit arrivals grabbed discarded clothing and pawed through it; others closed in on the naked former wearers. Body-search, Steve Roback told himself.

He was looking at Aladdin's Cave. Colonel Mkere took no chances over his cache. Round the clock guards inside the bunker: here came another jeep and a rusty white Datsun bearing replacements. Classic technique for avoiding conspiracy among hirelings—a mix of rivals and strangers, teaming Investigation Unit, militia, and mercenaries.

Boxes around boxes, guardians guarding guardians, and that was only the start. For when the inside men went off duty, *they* were searched in turn.

Nice play. The chances of Mkere's thugs from the Investigation Unit's joining forces with a militia man were remote. For them to get a merc on their side was even more remote. Too much mutual suspicion, fear of its being a setup or test. And even if the impossible came to pass, the second cordon waited.

Roback swore admiringly. No

need to tip the cordon about Colonel Mkere's stash. They'd just be ordered to search for valuables. But supposing they found some—what prevented their keeping the result for themselves? His eyes narrowed: nobody had got out of the Datsun.

His guess was confirmed. The outgoing guards were dressing, their replacements entering the bunker. And an Investigation Unit officer had gone to the white car, reporting that all was well. When the tinted window rolled down, Roback got a swift sighting of Colonel Julian Mkere. Discreet visit, his stretched Mercedes swapped for something anonymous . . .

Ten minutes later the bunker doors were shut flat once more, the vehicles had gone. Bob Mallard, released, complained, "I love eating dirt."

Roback wasn't listening. "How big is that fuel store?" he demanded. "Big enough for four guys to operate in there, plus, um, equipment? Wouldn't they keel over from heat?"

"How big? Gigundeous. Much larger than your average big-city bachelor flat, for instance. But heat would be a problem. Those bunkers have to be ventilated to prevent fumes building up, but . . ." Mallard's words tailed off. "*That's* it," he finished.

"What is?"

"Listen. That puttering noise. Wondered what it was getting on my nerves. It's a genny, little portable Japanese job. Generator that size couldn't supply enough juice to raise the doors, but it would be okay for running air conditioning in there."

Bob Mallard turned on his side, peering at Roback. "Why would anyone coop themselves up in a fuel bunker?" He answered himself, with a mixture of greed, awe, and plain fear. "Colonel Julian's private bank. Just a hop and a step from his getaway plane. Handy, eh?"

"You could say: Listen, kid, either we're partners on this, or you got a problem with me."

"If you fancy cracking Mkere's safe deposit out there, rotsa ruck and all that. Positively no competition from me. In fact I feel generous, you can keep that caper all to yourself."

Glee was mellowing Steve Roback, he nearly smiled. "We don't have to, Artie Clinch has done it for us."

Bringing Bob Mallard up to speed helped pass the interminable afternoon. "He good as told me, with that Aladdin's Cave crap," Roback concluded. "Clinch found a gimmick for smuggling stuff out."

"You think," Mallard amended.

"Had to be that way. Clinch

was out of his gourd with excitement when he gave me the ride. Because he was on the take. Just knowing the loot was there wouldn't do that for him—he'd have been like to slit his throat from frustration. Clinch was on the take, guards or no. He could be a very tricky dude, ol' Artie."

"Smuggle bullion past that crowd, with Colonel Julian breathing down their necks? Rubbish."

Roback pondered, unseeing as a column of ants used his leg as a bridge to the thorn bush's branches. Euphoria flickered before flaring anew. "Not gold bars. Diamonds. He gabbled about heaps of diamonds."

Mallard was irritated. "Artie was pulling your leg, then. Diamonds don't come out of the mine here all faceted up and polished, they're dirty pebbles. Unless it's an unusually big stone, you would have to steal a sack of them to make the risk worth the candle. Honestly, Steve—think it through. Your dirty pebbles have to be cut, remember."

"Diamonds," Roback insisted. "Artie wasn't joshing, that guy had greed as a religion, it would have been like . . . uh, *blasphemy*. I tell you, he was so high on greed he had to brag. Until he got hold of himself." Struck by a fresh insight, Ro-

back added, "My hunch is he tried out his gimmick and it worked and then he pulled it again with a raft of stuff, that night he gave me the ride."

Roback's teeth were grinding again. "Jeez, the stuff must have been on him, right next to me. Diamonds—and Artie Clinch wasn't talking no dirty pebbles!"

It was long after dark before they could slip away, Bob Mallard bitterly claiming as he hobbled to the jeep, hidden a mile from the airport perimeter fence, that he was a prematurely old man, cramped for life.

Rounding the bend before the New Freedom Hotel's drive, the headlights scythed out into space, branding a livid path across the sluggish, grey-green water of the Afur river. A dark, contorted, shiny shape—drowned corpse or leafless tree—surfaced momentarily, spinning and submerging.

Just about here Artie Clinch had fallen. His jeep had run out of gas at the foot of the slope, he'd been less than a hundred yards from safety. Left the jeep, strode up the slope and—Roback braked so hard that Mallard hit the windshield.

"Hey! Could those muggers, bandits, whatever, have lifted the diamonds?"

"Dode be sudge a twid!" Mallard ran tentative, exploratory fingers down the bridge of his nose and turned a teary gaze on Roback. "There weren't any diamonds. And they didn't have time to steal anything—I went out on the verandah, heard a ruckus, saw what was up, and drove them off.

"You were right on my heels, you saw the state Artie was in . . . Nothing missing, though; doubt whether they touched him." The youngster swallowed. "Except with those machetes. You checked his gun and everything, it was all there."

As Roback put the jeep in gear and moved off, Mallard sniggered, "No wonder you can't remember it straight. Well, you did throw a bit of a wobbly, Steve. Bellowing about bush-whacking and lord knows what. Terrific histrionics."

Scowling, Steve Roback mumbled, "I was boozed to the gills. But sober enough to know something was skewed about that business." In truth, he had little memory of the aftermath to murder, apart from confused rage.

They pulled into the New Freedom's parking lot. "Super day," Mallard yawned, "we must do it again soon. Call me, eh? Around the year 2020, preferably."

Roback was reproachful. "I

tell you Artie was into something rich enough to make his head spin. We ain't hardly started yet. Shower, eats, *one* good beer, then we got to take his room apart inch by inch."

Clinch's hotel room door was locked, but Steve Roback had the key. He kicked it open.

The smell was appalling, a tray of scrambled eggs, preserves, half a melon—you had to guess—sat on the unmade bed, sprouting Technicolor mold and alive with industrious insect life. Dried blood, at first glance, turned out to be spilt coffee on the tangled sheets. Evidently Artie Clinch had hurried off to the airport the day he died, and nobody had disturbed his lair since then.

"Great," Roback cried, "we're the first."

"And last, no doubt." Bob Mallard, distasteful, hooked discarded jockey shorts on the toe of his cowboy boot, flicking them aside. "Really, Steve, it's *quelle* squalid."

"Well," Roback said generously, "Artie was a dogface soldier, never got educated to live right, police his quarters properly. Now we got to be systematic here." He pursed his lips in thought. "Start at the door, go slow and careful, throw everything into the bathroom as we

go. We're looking for diamonds, right?"

The pilot sighed heavily. "If you insist."

Four hours later he was whining, "We can't go over it again. *There's nothing here.*"

Artie Clinch's room wasn't a mess any longer. It was wrecked, gutted. Light shades down, bulbs glaring from naked flex, pillows ripped, mattress slit. Clinch's possessions had been minimal, and they'd scrutinized, probed, broken apart each item.

"You checked the shower head and the faucets, the cistern and all in there?" Roback jerked a thumb at the bathroom, now piled with vandalized gear and clothes with all seams gaping.

"Twice," Mallard confirmed. "And that was after you'd been through them." Letting himself slide down the wall, he sprawled in a corner, eyes closed.

"So they're not here," Roback brooded. "Fine, then we'll extend the search area."

"Yes," Bob Mallard agreed, "you will. Include me out. Talk about obsessions, you make Captain Ahab look a diletante." Steve Roback, unable to place the officer among mercs and regular military encountered in the past decade, dismissed the passing interest.

"What's the matter?" he asked sharply. Mallard, frowning, had

lifted his tail and was picking something out of the rug.

"Spent bullet," he said, holding the thing between finger and thumb. "Funny, I can't see gunshot damage here."

Roback pounced on the slug. "Figures—this little sucker's never been fired. See, smooth as a baby's cheek, no discoloration."

Mallard, shrugging, stifled a yawn and said, "I found an empty cartridge case under the bed. Along with debris I'd rather forget. Maybe that bullet came from it."

Snapping his fingers, Roback said an extremely rude word, reverently. "Cartridges, 9mm. stuff, a half-empty carton. Where are they?" Resignedly, joints cracking, Bob Mallard rose and began sifting through oddments in the bathroom.

"I'll be right back," said his partner, "got to get something out of my room."

The cardboard box of ammunition, fuzzy from being hauled around in holdall and kitbag, was the standard honeycomb arrangement of card partitions with ten or so bullets nosing up from their nests. Mallard slapped it into Roback's shovel palm. "Look, if I don't get to bed I'll fall over. Enjoy . . ."

"And miss the goddam cabaret?" Roback brandished the

pliers he'd brought from his gear. "Shame on you." Hooked despite himself, the pilot lingered.

Lacking a vise, Roback pinched a cartridge between the hinge edge of the door and its jamb. He paused with the pliers' jaws just biting the bullet. "Artie was tricky, like I said. He knew he'd be searched, but somehow he got stuff out." His arm muscles jumped into prominence, he levered and then yanked, the cartridge case stayed in the crack of door while its bullet came away with the pliers, like a tooth.

Dropping it, Roback took the cartridge case, rapping the little brass tube upside down on the bedside table. This produced a minuscule litter of propellant substance, and an empty case.

"Nice," Mallard applauded.

"Shut the hell up, gimme another cartridge." Murphy's Law decreed that only the last one concealed paydirt. Roback rapped, and this time a tissue-wrapped granule fell onto the table.

Pool-cue fingers delicate, he peeled the paper away. Mallard, exhaling as if hit in the belly, craned closer. Roback grinned fondly, a father catching sight of his baby for the first time. "Worth waiting for," he stated smugly.

The glittering thing burned coldly, a giant ice queen's tear-drop. "Dirty pebble, huh? Way it worked, Clinch had a cartridge case rigged ready to open while he was guarding the stash. Snatched this baby, hid it in the cartridge, put it in his weapon. Investigation Unit could frisk him, but in the end he'd get his weapon back. Nice."

"I'm the twit," Mallard conceded, kneeling at the table. "This never came from the province's mine, it's a good stone ripped out of the original setting. Makes sense: Colonel Julian shakes down the fat cats, their jewelry's broken up, settings melted into bars, stones set aside. Gold's heavy, bulky—if you have to travel far and fast, diamonds are the most portable wealth on earth, international currency."

Blinking sweat away, young Mallard giggled wildly. "Dad used to be a jeweller. Any idea what this is worth?"

"Surprise me, kid."

"Ten thousand pounds if it's a penny." The pilot cast a wistful look at the disembowelled cartridges on the rug. "What a shame Clinch got bumped off before he could nick a few more like this one!"

"Wrong," Roback purred. "I guess once he test-ran the gimmick and it worked fine, he went for broke." Mallard, non-

plussed by his expression, caught on that Steve Roback was beaming foolishly. "Browning self-loading pistol takes thirteen cartridges, count 'em. Say he took diamonds worth no more than this sucker, let's be cautious—that's thirteen times maybe fourteen thousand dollars. Me, I got simple tastes, and even split two ways it'll make me one happy s.o.b."

Bob Mallard was puzzled. Roback winked jovially. "You still don't get it. Clinch filled his piece with diamond bullets—that's why he didn't use it on those muggers. He couldn't. Fourteen-thousand-dollar bullets but not worth a damn when they jumped him."

Mallard's reaction was weird. His eyes bugged, his arms flailed, he might have been imitating an outboard motor as he stammered, "But . . . but . . . but . . ." Oblivious, Roback hugged him.

"Go get Clinch's Browning, let's practice some more painless dentistry." At last he noticed the pilot's distress, and was struck by a terrible doubt. "You collected his billfold and dogtags and such. Didn't you take the Browning as well?"

"No, you drunken moron," Mallard croaked. "You took it.

You hurtled onto the scene like a damned boozy bull in a china shop and took charge and, and . . ." Beyond words, he fairly gibbered with fury.

Steve Roback experienced total recall, like a mallet on top of his skull. He hadn't really forgotten, just misplaced knowledge of what happened. First the liquor drew a veil and then his subconscious, saving him searing regret, had ordered him brief amnesia.

Now he remembered.

It wasn't deep in the forest—that was the far side of the river—but something definitely stirred. A safari sound, ideal for TV jungle shows: an incredibly loud, anguished bellow blending berserk rage and wild lamentation.

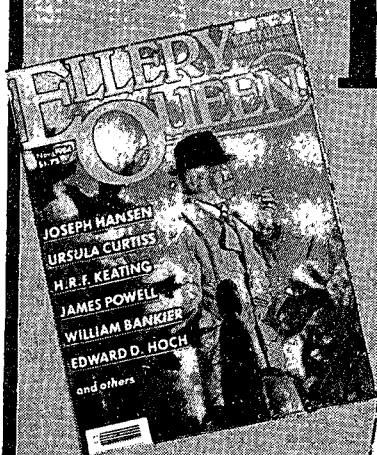
It was the sound made by Dwight Steven Roback. Seeing himself in the minutes after Artie Clinch's passing. Swearing a blue streak because Clinch hadn't defended himself right. Checking the Browning, working the slide, snapping the full magazine back into its butt . . .

Then hurling the thing far, not just into the night but out of reach for eternity, somewhere in the deep and muddy Afur river, so treacherously, meanly, unfairly close at hand.

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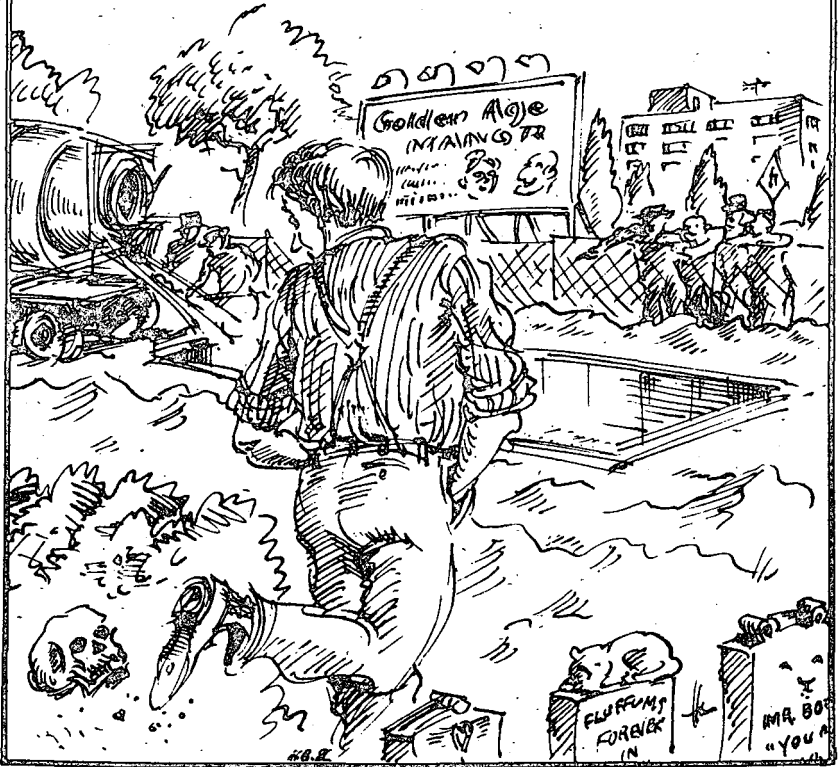
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FICTION

A Grave Mistake

by Karen L. Todd



Aunt Sophie left all her money, \$327,243 to be exact, to my ex-wife, Kate. To me, she left Eternal Peace Cemetery. At least she'd had the decency to include a riding lawn mower with it. I cut the last swath of drying grass, drove the mower into the storage shed, then reluctantly turned on the sprinklers.

Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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The droplets glistened in the late afternoon sunlight, each one reminding me of a bright, shiny dime melting into the earth. I thought of the threatening notice from the water company nestled among the other dunning letters on my desk.

Twelve acres had probably seemed like a lot of land when Aunt Sophie established the cemetery, but now there was less than an acre "unoccupied." Those were the undesirable plots at the back of the cemetery, next to a slump block fence bordering Truck Route 20. If I was to have any kind of a future, there were only three choices . . . buy up adjoining land, build a mausoleum on the remaining ground, or sell the whole works. The first two were unthinkable, unless Kate died and bequeathed me Aunt Sophie's money. Not likely, unless I could manage to outlive everyone else on earth.

As for selling, I'd had the place listed with George Pearson since I fell heir to it eight months before. Not a nibble. And that's the ironic part. I owned what was probably the only piece of *depreciating* property in the whole world, while all around my fenced estate the values were skyrocketing.

The acreage across the highway had just sold for a couple of hundred grand. A twenty foot sign announced it was the future home of GOLDEN AGE MANOR—A MULTI-STORY RETIREMENT COMMUNITY. I could hear a bulldozer working over there, preparing the ground.

I turned off the sprinklers just as the sun changed into a fiery red ball, watched as it disappeared behind the distant hills, then walked toward the main building. Even from fifty yards away, I could see bare patches on the white exterior. How long before the dying grass and peeling paint would discourage people from leaving their loved ones in my care?

I locked the door from the inside, crossed the small chapel, and entered my office. Before tackling the bills, I poured myself a shot of bourbon and put a tape on the player.

My fingers made the adding machine keys hum, but no matter how many times I added the columns, the answers came out the same. I had to come up with two thousand dollars in a matter of days, or everything was down the drain. Aunt Sophie never expected to make much money off the cemetery. It was really just a hobby she could afford to indulge.

Of course, Aunt Sophie wasn't making restitution for money she'd embezzled, the way I was. That was one of the conditions of

my parole. If I got behind in the payments, I wouldn't have to worry about my future for a long time. Especially when they found out I'd used the Pre-Need Fund and the Perpetual Care Fund to make those payments. Talk about robbing Peter to pay Paul . . .

The bourbon bottle was poised over my glass when I heard the emergency bell at the front door. I quickly spritzed my mouth with breath freshener, took the Beatles tape off the machine and replaced it with Organ Classics, then shrugged into my jacket. I patted my hair into place just before opening the door.

"Hey, lighten up, buddy. You don't have to put on that Gloomy Gus act with me." Fritz Henry didn't look any better in his expensive suit than he did in jailhouse dungarees, which was all I'd ever seen him in. He had a face like Truck Route 20 . . . all bumps and potholes, with a few ruts thrown in for good measure.

"I don't get many casual visitors out here." That was true, and it sometimes got lonely. I forced a smile, then reached for his extended hand. "Good to see you." That was a lie. I didn't think I'd ever be lonely enough to want to see Fritz.

I invited him into my office and he seated himself in the tapestry chair usually occupied by the bereaved, the one next to the table with the box of tissues on it.

"Got anything to drink in this morgue?" He didn't so much laugh as bray. That was one of the things I'd hated most about sharing a cell with him. As usual, I laughed with him. A lot of guys in jail try to make you believe they have Mafia connections, but there was never any doubt in my mind about Fritz. So I did everything to keep on his good side.

I pulled the bourbon bottle from the bottom drawer, found a clean glass, and poured us each a hefty drink.

"Cheers." He swallowed hard, then belched. "You hear I beat the rap?"

"Yeah, I read about it in the paper." Fritz had been waiting to stand trial for murder when I got paroled.

"It's funny how people start to get amnesia right before a trial, ain't it? Not one of them witnesses remembered seeing me at Joey's that night." Joey was the deceased in question. Fritz brayed again and held his empty glass toward me.

"Well, what brings you here?" I leaned forward with the bottle, then topped my own drink off for good measure.

"Just thought I'd stop and see how you was getting along. You like the funeral business? Making a fortune?"

"To tell you the truth, the answer to both questions is no. I don't like the business, but it's all I have, and it's better than jail. On the other hand, if I don't make more money soon, I'm going to be warming my old cot again."

His eyes narrowed. "That bad, huh? Damn, that's a shame." His sympathy didn't sound sincere.

Fritz reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a cigar and a disposable lighter. A gray cloud of smoke swirled upward. When he'd finished hacking, he leaned back in the chair. "Seems like I came at just the right time."

"Well, I could use a loan, if you have some to spare. I'd pay it back just as soon . . ."

"Not a loan, buddy. But I need your services, so to speak."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I thought this was a social call. I didn't realize you'd suffered a loss." It was hard going into my somber act after three glasses of bourbon.

"It's no loss, Harold. Just a bum who met with an accident. He needs a final resting place, and naturally I thought of you first off."

"You mean a . . . person?"

Fritz nodded, then puffed out a cloud of smoke.

"But this is a *pet* cemetery. I can't . . ." It sounded stupid as soon as I said it.

"I know this is a pet cemetery. What difference does it make?"

"Well, for one thing, I don't have a coffin big enough, and . . . and I don't have a backhoe. This ground is harder than hell. You need a backhoe to dig a grave big enough for a person." I reached for the bourbon bottle.

"Maybe I said it wrong. I don't need your services so much as I need a little piece of real estate, and I'm willing to pay a bundle."

His last words did more to soothe my nerves than the bourbon. "How much?"

"How about a coupla grand, and I recommend this place to my friends?"

"And I don't have to do anything?"

"Just keep your mouth shut. You won't see nothin' and you won't hear nothin'. I guarantee."

The next morning was the toughest. The patch of loose sod in the "unoccupied" area spooked me. But when I unlocked the door to the chapel, there was an envelope that had dropped through the mail slot. And in it was a stack of twenty-dollar bills. That con-

vinced me the guy probably had died in an accident, and it was none of my business anyway.

As the months passed, my creditors and I became happier, and the "unoccupied" area diminished. I'd repaid the Pre-Need and Perpetual Care Funds, and was making my restitution payments with no sweat. Soon I'd be able to start saving toward expansion. Yes indeed, by the time the area was full, I'd have enough money to build a mausoleum right on top of it. The sky was the limit.

The retirement home across the highway was taking shape, eight stories of naked concrete and girders, and I was hoping for a stormy autumn to delay construction. The top floors looked directly down onto Eternal Peace. Once the old folks moved in, I'd have to stop allowing "evening services," as I'd come to think of them.

Meanwhile, I'd been watering the lawn daily and had put a fresh coat of paint on the chapel building. The improved appearance of the cemetery brought me increased pet funeral business. Except for the retirement home, I hardly had a care in the world.

At least, not until George Pearson came huffing his way across the cemetery to where I was digging a grave for Mrs. Johnson's poodle, Poopsie. George formed his rubbery lips into a smile, which must have been tough, since he was panting so hard. "Good news, Harold. I have a buyer for you. Yessir, I walked all the way over here to tell you, even though my car's in the shop."

"But I don't want to sell the cemetery any more." He'd caught me by surprise. Frankly, I'd forgotten it had ever been listed for sale.

George took his hat off and wiped his forehead on his sleeve. "My client doesn't want the cemetery. Just that part over by the fence that you haven't used yet."

"Well, he'll have to look somewhere else. It's no longer on the market."

He replaced the brown hat on his head, then stared at me. George had a patriotic face . . . red veins on a field of white, topped with starry blue eyes. If that didn't tip you off to his boozing, his breath would. People liked to keep their distance from George. Unfortunately, George was the friendly type who liked to drape an arm around your shoulder. That alone could be pretty unpleasant in the summer.

"If you didn't want to sell, you shouldn't have renewed the agreement last winter. My listing still has a month to go, and I . . . my client, that is, wants this property."

I leaned on my shovel and stared back at him. Visions of prison chums danced through my head. I fought to keep my voice calm. "The answer is *no*, and that's final, George. I'm sorry about the inconvenience, but you can't force me to sell." Ten minutes on that property with a bulldozer was equal to forty-five years, roughly the remainder of my life expectancy.

He came toward me, but there was no friendliness in his manner. George's eyes were mean slits. "I think I *can* force you to sell. Once people around here learn you're an ex-con, you won't have any business. Without business, you can't make a living." His breath was fetid.

A trickle of sweat rolled down my belly. "How did you find out?" I nearly choked on the words.

"Your Aunt Sophie told me one time when we were having a little drink together. Told me how ashamed she was. You nearly broke that poor woman's heart."

"Don't do this to me, George. I've worked hard here. I'm making restitution. Without this business, I'll go back to jail."

George opened his eyes in mock surprise. "Do tell. Then it seems to me the best thing is to go ahead and sell the property. That way you can pay your debt to society in full, and maybe have a little left over."

A few months before, his offer would have been a dream come true, but now it was a nightmare.

"I'm not selling."

"Well, it's your choice, son. Either sell now at a fair price, or I'll wait till you go broke. Makes no difference to me."

His smirk did it.

Suddenly, the world was a red haze, and the coppery taste of blood was strong in my mouth.

As George turned to walk away, I swung the shovel.

The retirement home opened right on schedule . . . theirs, not mine. I'd hoped to have a few more thousand stashed away before starting the mausoleum.

On the other hand, there was no reason to delay construction now. And it couldn't be soon enough for me. Goose bumps sent little shock waves through my skin as I paced off the "unoccupied" area, but it had nothing to do with the chill morning air. Every time I came back here, the ghosts rose to meet me. One in particular.

Fritz Henry said he knew a contractor who would keep his mouth shut, but even so, I didn't want any nasty surprises while they were building the foundation. Going from memory, I paced the area, trying to decide where the water line should go.

I heard a series of quick crunches on the gravel path and looked up, annoyed. A slight figure in a lavender jogging suit was rapidly approaching. Foggy breath obscured the face, but I instinctively knew it was a woman.

When she was about about thirty feet away, she saw me and halted. There was no doubt now . . . she was definitely a woman.

"Oh, you surprised me." She took a few deep breaths, and removed the headband from her short auburn hair. "There's usually no one here this early. Do you mind?" She walked toward me.

"No, I don't mind. At least not this time of morning. But it might be a little inappropriate when I'm conducting services."

Her smile would have made Marie Osmond jealous. Dimples. She held out her hand. "I'm Marcy Rogers from across the street."

Not possible. She couldn't have been more than twenty-five. I shook her hand. "Nice to meet you, Marcy. I'm Harold Wells. Aren't you a little young for Golden Age Manor?"

"Sometimes I think I'm too old. I'm the social director. That's why I have to stay in shape. You can't imagine how much energy it takes to keep up with the guests' activities!" Her sea-blue eyes glistened in the early sunlight.

"Somehow that never crossed my mind. I thought they just sat around and watched television."

"Oh, no. Most of our people aren't infirm. They just like being with folks their own age. You wouldn't believe the romances we have going over there." She began jogging in place.

I forced my eyes back to her face. "You're welcome to run here . . ."

"Except during services. Thanks. Maybe I'll see you again sometime." Marcy rewarded me with another smile before speeding away.

I'd sworn off women after Kate divorced me. It still hurt. I didn't know if the hurt was because I missed her, or because I had to live with the blame. She hadn't asked to be married to an embezzler. But I wasn't going to set myself up for that kind of pain again.

The next morning, I watched Marcy from my office window. And the next morning, we chatted beside the storage shed. And the next morning I asked her for a date.

Marcy was beautiful, but she was also vibrant. I'd become accustomed to dealing with death, and her vitality woke emotions that had been lying dormant for a long time.

Soon, we were seeing each other every spare moment.

I was in love, and I was scared spitless. What if she found out I'd done time? Or worse, what if she found out about my association with Fritz Henry and his buddies? Or worst, what if she found out I'd killed George Pearson?

If we get together, I vowed, I'll never so much as jay-walk for the rest of my life.

The rumble of a bulldozer interrupted my daydreams. Hallelujah! By this time next week, the foundation for the mausoleum would be poured. I walked to the "unoccupied" area. When I'd explained all the stakes in the ground to the operator, he climbed back into the seat and began manipulating levers.

Within fifteen minutes, a group of old geezers from Golden Age Manor was leaning against the fence. Oh, cripes! What if a . . . something turned up while they were gawking? I had to get them out of there.

I ran back to my office and picked up the phone, then set it down again. I wiped the palms of my hands on my pants, then began to pace. I had to have a plausible reason for getting rid of them.

"Hello, Harold. How are you this morning?" There was a smile in Marcy's voice.

"Oh, just fine. But there is a little problem."

Concern replaced the smile. "What kind of problem?"

"Well, some of your men are over here watching the excavation, and I don't think that's a good idea."

"Are they interfering with the work?"

"No, not exactly."

"Then what's the problem?"

"Uh, Marcy, not many people know this, but Aunt Sophie used that area as sort of a potter's field. You know, for homeless little ones, and the ones who . . . met with accidents on the highway. There's no telling what the bulldozer will turn up, and I don't think it's good for those old men to have to see it."

She laughed. She honest-to-goodness laughed. "Harold, most of those men have served in at least one war, and a lot of them grew up on farms. They were probably helping butcher by the time they were five. I hardly think a few little bones will bother them. Why, you ought to hear some of the stories they tell."

"I don't know, Marcy . . ."

"Please, Harold, let them watch. It's easy to keep the ladies occupied, but the old gentlemen get restless. It will do them a world of good."

I spent most of the next few days with the old codgers, hoping I could manage to divert their attention in the event of an accident.

Fred Lincoln was their ringleader. He'd worked construction all his life. He was also a staunch critic.

"That there foundation's gonna be slaunchwise the property, the way you got it laid out. Ain't gonna look good." The wrinkles in his face crisscrossed to form perfect diamonds. On the days he wore his dentures, anyway. They scrunched together a little when he didn't.

"Haven't seen so much rebar since I built Boulder Dam." According to Fred, he'd built the dam single-handed. "Don't know why you want rebar in the foundation, anyway. Don't need it.

"You're gettin' the foundation way too thick, boy. Too much concrete. You're jes' wasting money hand over fist."

The specs had called for eight inches of concrete, but I'd insisted on ten inches, reinforced. *Maybe* it would keep the ghosts down.

My mind constantly played tricks on me during the excavation. Every broken tree root was a bleached, bony finger pointing at me. Each scrape of the blade against a rock sent shivers up my spine.

I'd hardly slept since the project began, and when I did, my dreams were haunted.

Then finally, mercifully, it was finished.

I felt the tension ooze from my body as the concrete truck made the last pour.

Tonight, Marcy and I would celebrate. Not that the pouring of a foundation would mean much to her; but . . .

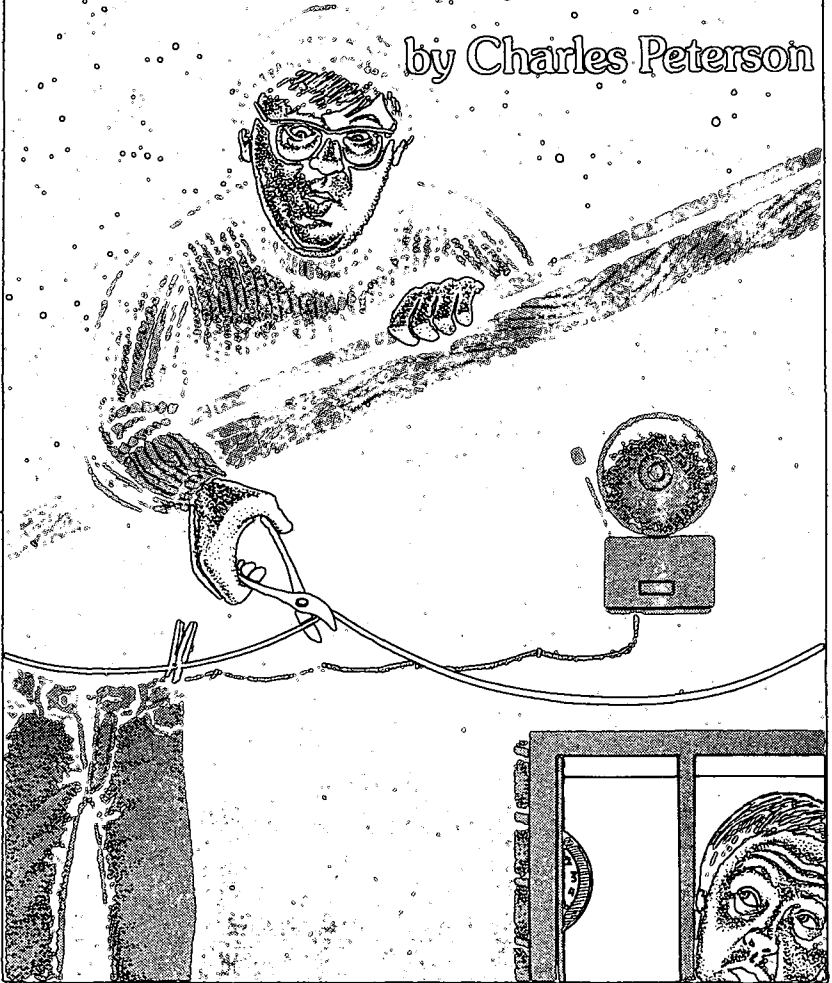
I heard the click of the mailslot just as I was putting Tweetie-Pie into his little coffin. Visitation wasn't scheduled for another twenty minutes, so I had plenty of time to peruse the mail.

There wasn't much. Just a circular from Safety-Net Life Insurance and a letter from the State saying they were condemning the "unoccupied" portion of the cemetery to widen Truck Route 20.

FICTION

Augie and the White Sheep

by Charles Peterson



Those who know me only as Augie Augenblick, Upstanding Citizen, are unaware that at one time I answered to the name of Kit the Cat Burglar, and am considered quite an ornament to the profession. For one reason or another, I find it politic not to enlighten them. It is enough that certain people who do know nowadays—such as Detective Sergeant Mike Zeprowski and my parole board—keep a wary eye on me, as if expecting me to pop in a second-story window and pop out with the family piggybank, at the drop of an alias.

But even at the height of my career, I am never one to court publicity, and consequently it is with considerable surprise that I find myself accosted one day during this period by a couple of hoods and hustled into a black four-door sedan with one-way windows.

"Wh—wh—what's the big idea?" I remark, when I find my tongue no longer stuck to the roof of my mouth.

"Knuckles wants to see you," replies Hood #1, curtly.

Enough said. When Knuckles McCloskey wants to see somebody, that person may as well make up his mind to be seen, since Knuckles is by way of being a prime mover in his circles, which rotate some levels below those of polite society.

And, conversely, people whom Knuckles does *not* want to see are often never seen again. By anybody.

So it is with some anxiety that I try to figure out what I may have done to attract Knuckles' attention. I am still baffled as we reach McCloskey's headquarters in a warehouse on the waterfront. Hoods #1 and #2 escort me to an inner office where Knuckles is seated at his desk, idly spinning the cylinder on a .38 revolver. He jerks his head and #1 and #2 disappear into the woodwork. Then he gives me the once-over.

It is sort of like being an impala, or perhaps a dik-dik, that has wandered into a lion's field of vision shortly before lunchtime. The McCloskey eye is a chilly glacial blue. The McCloskey jaw is outthrust pug-naciously. The McCloskey ears appear to have been vigorously chewed on from time to time. The McCloskey frame tends to bulk, and his beefy hands give you the impression that he could peel an underling the way a gorilla peels a banana. Altogether, a vision calculated to turn an already flaccid spine into jelly as he gives the cylinder a final ratcheting twirl and clears his throat.

"You got any kids, Kit?" says Knuckles McCloskey.

This strikes me as such a bizarre opener that, for a moment, I can't remember if I have or not.

"No," I say, finally. "Sir."

Knuckles sighs. "You're lucky. Kids can really put your back hair up, y'know?"

There is another trenchant pause as I frame a gurgling response that can be interpreted as agreeing, disagreeing, or expressing complete neutrality—whichever is called for.

"Yup," McCloskey continues. "Sometimes you wanna smack 'em. And sometimes you don't," he points out, as one who can be fair-minded about the question. "Now you take Locky, for instance."

"Locky?"

"My son, Lochinvar," says Knuckles. And as he pronounces the name he shoots a glance at me as though inviting a snicker—at which he will see to it that I am not among those represented in any future census data.

"Lul-Lul-Lul-Lochinvar," I reply, nodding eleven or twelve times to show that I comprehend perfectly.

"I've given that kid everything," says Knuckles, lapsing into a retrospective mood. "Let him use my shoulder holster to teethe on. Gave him his first little blackjack when he was three. Even had his initials on

it. Got him his own .22 pistol when he was five. Last year I gave him a submachine gun and this year a deluxe credit card forging kit. So what happens?"

"Well, I suppose . . ."

"I'll tell you what happens. The kid uses the blackjack to crack nuts with. He can't hit the broad side of a barn with a rock, let alone a heater. The machine gun is rusting away because he forgets to clean and oil it. The only credit card he ever forges is one for his pet hamster. I fix him up with his own territory for the numbers racket and see to it that nobody muscles in. You guessed it. Within three weeks the take is off eighty-seven point three percent and I am getting rude questions from the front office."

"No head for business," I comment, and am terror-stricken at having perhaps said the wrong thing as he suddenly slams a hand on the desk and everything jumps six inches into the air, self included. Hood #1 pops his head in the door, saying, "You rang?"

Knuckles waves him away again, and his jaw protrudes another couple of inches. "Well, ain't nobody gonna say I stood around twiddling my thumbs while the McCloskey name was getting—what's that word that begins with a 's'?"

"Stigmatized?"

"Sandbagged—just because the kid doesn't get every advantage. There's good stuff in him—in spite of a mother who reads poetry—and I'm here to see that he gets every chance!"

"That's the spirit!"

"As I see it, the problem is that nobody ever takes a real interest in Locky to show him the ropes. My fault, I suppose—but you know how it is when a guy gets all wrapped up in business. I figure the thing to do is find an expert who'll take Locky under his wing."

"A tutor?"

"You're darn tootin', a tutor," says Knuckles. "About the only job he hasn't tried yet is burgling, and I figure that you, being the best cat burglar in town, are the tutor to do the tootin'!"

Everything goes black.

It is only momentary, of course, for when full consciousness returns, Knuckles is repeating his last line in a pleased sort of way, as if he'd like to set it to music. There are about a hundred reasons I can think of why this is a really rotten idea; the least of which is that I've never been certified by the Board of Education, but something tells me Knuckles does not wish to be

confused with facts. Nevertheless, I feel I have to make the effort. "But it takes years of training to make a good second-story man!"

"Then the sooner you get started, the better," says Knuckles.

It is hard to argue with that kind of logic, so I remain clammed up as he hollers for Hood #1 and tells him to bring in Locky. Moments later he returns, propelling a kid before him.

"Hello, Father," says Lochinvar McCloskey.

This specimen is about seventeen, and my spirits, which have been sinking for about forty-five minutes, go down for the third time, for he does not, to coin an understatement, look like promising cat burglar material at all. Lochinvar is sort of pudgy in all directions, with a haystack of hair falling over his eyes, which are a guileless blue and peer out at you from behind a big pair of glasses. He wears a kind of apologetic grin, and there is something about the way he trips on a piece of frayed carpeting and caroms into a nearby packing case that fills me with foreboding.

Knuckles performs the introductions and gives Lochinvar the gist of the plot thus far, which is greeted with well-concealed enthusiasm.

"Gee, Father," he says, doubtfully, "do you think this is the right thing to do?"

"I'm trying to give you a well-rounded education, son," says Knuckles benignly, then turns to me and scowls. "And we don't want to lose any time, do we?"—which I take to mean that the semester begins at once. "And, by the way, I expect regular reports and a ticket to the graduation exercises." He twirls the cylinder of his .38 again. "Or else!"

There is only one thing needed to make my day complete and Fate, co-operative as always, hastens to supply it. As Lochinvar and I are ambling down the street after the conference with Knuckles, I find our progress impeded by a pair of size twelve police shoes and the inhabitant thereof—namely, Detective Sergeant Mike Zeprowski.

"Well!" he says, affecting astonishment. "How unusual to see you out in the daylight, Kit! And on the sidewalk instead of climbing up somebody's downspouts! You sick or something? And who is this?" he continues, eyeing young Lochinvar sourly. "Someone the truant officer rejected?"

"I'm Lochinvar McCloskey," says the kid; before I can stop him.

Zeprowski studies him carefully. "No, you aren't," he decides at last. "Nobody is named Lochinvar McCloskey. Therefore, Kit here has probably told you not to give any cop your right name. Which is too bad because we are here to help folks and you shouldn't be playing fast and loose with our sensibilities, let alone taking advice from people who would be in the jug right now if I had anything to back my suspicions."

"No, honest," says Lochinvar. "Mr. Kit is teaching me how to—urg!" His train of thought, is suddenly derailed as he finds my hands around his throat.

"You were saying?" says Zeprowski.

"No, he wasn't," I say, as Lochinvar begins to turn blue. "He has this speech impediment that is triggered by the sight of police badges. And Lesson Number One," I point out to Lochinvar, when we have bade adieu to Zeprowski and the kid's respiration has been restored, "is never to volunteer any information to cops—even to tell him it's a nice day."

"Oh." Lochinvar digests this. "He said something about seeing you out in the daylight . . ."

"So?"

"Does this mean you work mostly at night?"

"It tends to make things easier all around."

"Oh." Lochinvar looks unhappy, and I ask him what's the beef. "Oh, nothing. Only that it'll probably interfere with my moth collecting."

"You collect moths?"

"I have the second-best collection in town," Lochinvar says, beaming. "Only the Howard Hottinger collection is any better. The thing is, you see, you find moths mostly at night."

I tsk-tsk sympathetically. "I'm afraid you'll have to let your moth collecting slide for a bit. Tell me," I add, as he gets a resigned look, "how are you at climbing?"

Not very good, it turns out. In fact, Lochinvar McCloskey could be haled, jailed, bailed, tried, and sentenced in the time it takes him to get over a simple little seven foot fence—and that's with a boost from me. So the first thing I have to do is get Locky into some kind of shape, other than spherical, and soon we are both enrolled in calisthenics and body-building classes at the Y, and out jogging in the early morning hours. As might be expected, this meets with considerable opposition from my student, at first, as his idea of exercise is lifting a spoon weighted down with big globs of ice cream and hot fudge, and the thought of running more than a block is enough to shock him into complete paralysis.

But references to possible parental disapproval have their effect.

Somewhat to our mutual surprise, he begins little by little to enjoy the regimen, and presently we are tootling hither and thither like contenders for the Boston Marathon. On one occasion we have the sensation that we are being followed by a brontosaurus and find Detective Sergeant Zeprowski overhauling us.

"Good morning," he says, hardly puffing at all. "Nice day."

"I wouldn't know," says Lochinvar, thereby earning a star on his report card for the day. Zeprowski humphs and passes by, but I am none too happy at the thought that he is monitoring our activities, which seem to puzzle him no end.

Also maintaining surveillance, I find, is Knuckles himself, whom we encounter another morning. He brings us to a halt and exchanges a few remarks, the tenor of which is that I am not supposed to be grooming an Olympic hopeful, but someone who can walk, not run, into the family business. The beads of perspiration on my brow are not entirely due to our physical exertions as I explain that Locky needs some preliminary training before we get to the applied arts. I am relieved when Knuckles ponders this

and finally nods, "Yeah, I guess you're right. He is pretty much a hotbed of flab, ain't he?— although," he adds, after another look, "not so much as a few weeks ago, at that."

All this time, we have not been neglecting our academic studies, but here the going is unexpectedly tougher. For example:

I say: "You will find that most burglar alarms can be detected by one of the following three methods."

Lochinvar replies: "Did you know that the *Actias luna*, or luna moth, has been called the most beautiful North American insect? I have three of them at home."

I say: "These are the six most commonly used hiding places for jewelry or other valuables."

Lochinvar responds: "The family *Orneodidae* have each wing cleft divided into six feathers. Isn't that a coincidence?"

So we proceed through *Casing the Joint 101*, *Elementary Glass Cutting*, *The Care and Cure of Fingerprints*, and *Escape Route Planning*, and even touch on *Fencing for Beginners*. But it is an uphill struggle for the most part, and although Zeprowski seems to have given up on us, at least temporarily, Knuckles is becoming more and more impatient, and insistent

that we put Locky to the test.

I make it as easy as I can, choosing a mansion in Rexbury Heights that I have checked out previously. It is surrounded by bushes providing good cover, with a couple of trees that offer easy access to upstairs windows. The house boasts an ancient alarm system that can be rendered inoperative by anyone who has ever unplugged a toaster, and it has been announced in the papers that Mr. and Mrs. J. Peverill Pepperidge, whose antique coin collection is famous, will be in San Francisco on Tuesday, attending a convention.

So, on Tuesday night, I see to it that Lochinvar is properly attired in a black jumpsuit and rubber-soled shoes, and pull the black stocking cap down over his ears. "Remember those six most likely hiding places!" I whisper, and send him on his way.

Six minutes later, floodlights go on all around the house, a shrill whistle sets up a sustained blast from somewhere inside, every dog within three miles starts howling, and a police siren begins sounding off in the distance. There is a floundering in the underbrush and Lochinvar reappears.

"What was that you said about cutting the alarm wires?" he pants.

"White wire first, then the black."

"There wasn't any black wire. I think maybe I cut the clothes-line."

"You guys wanna stick around till the cops get here?" says a third voice, and I discover that Knuckles McCloskey has been auditing the class. "Come on!"

The subsequent critique in Knuckles' office is nothing I wish to dwell on, as it is highly embarrassing—especially that part about my so-called reputation, and the query as to how I will look in a cement overcoat should anything untoward happen to Lochinvar. And the next morning I am picked up by Detective Sergeant Zeprowski, who questions me closely about an attempted burglary at the Pepperidge house. I feel somewhat vindicated when he says this attempt is so inept that he's pretty sure I had nothing to do with it—so I don't need the alibi furnished by Hoods #1 and #2, who are prepared, at a suggestion from Knuckles, to swear that we were all playing table tennis all evening.

For our next field exercise, I pick an even easier pad to crash—much smaller than Pepperidge's, and it doesn't have any security system at all. The folks who live there are hard of hearing and sleep in a back bedroom upstairs, so all Lochinvar

has to do is cut a little hole in a window in order to slip the catch and whisk inside. I even arrange for a moonless night with cloud cover so that Lochinvar can't be seen from more than three feet away and, pressing a glass cutter into his gloved hand, I tell him to go to it.

For a while I believe we really have it made. Then there is a huge commotion in the bushes at the side of the house, which are seen to be thrashing about wildly, as I hear Lochinvar yapping about something in a strident tone. It is enough to wake the dead, let alone a partially deaf couple. Lights switch on upstairs, a quavery voice yells, "Halt, or I fire!" and a shotgun goes off with a roar like a cannon as Lochinvar comes loping from cover. I latch onto his collar and drag him into a convenient alley.

"What is it this time?" I inquire when we are out of danger. "Did you forget what you were doing and ring the doorbell?"

Lochinvar's eyes are wide behind his glasses. "Did you see it? A rattle-box moth—*Utethesia ornatrix bella*! Flew right in front of me! Never saw one this far west before—and there I was without my net!"

I feel like one of those Old Testament prophets about to

rend my robes and smite my forehead—or Lochinvar’s—but instead take a little comfort in remarking that if he’s looking for a net, the boys in white jackets will be after him with one, shortly. He is properly contrite, but this doesn’t seem to improve his technique to any great extent. On our next sortie, I go with him to make sure he actually gets into the house, only to have him trip over a footstool with a crash that upsets an end table and a lamp and awakens a nearby parrot who asks if he wants a cracker. Turns out that Lochinvar’s night vision is nothing to brag about. After that, we try an Over-the-Roof-and-Into-the-Attic maneuver, but at the critical moment I find he is no longer with the safari. He is back at the edge of the roof, eyes closed and clinging to the shingles as though expecting the roof to rear up and throw him off like a bucking bronco. Turns out he has a thing about heights, and it is all I can do to pry him loose and talk him down to terra firma.

“I don’t mind telling you, young Lochinvar,” I sigh, “that I am becoming just a bit discouraged with your performance.”

“You and Father both,” he rejoins, unhappily.

“I can’t see what the problem is, either. You’ve shed so much

weight you’re as spry as a mountain goat. In the gym you climb around like a monkey. You go through all our practice runs in great shape. But when it comes to the final test . . .”

“I know,” Lochinvar nods dumbly. “I choke. I don’t know why.”

“Are you worried about what Knuckles might do to me if you flunk out? If so, forget it. I can always change my name, dye my hair, have plastic surgery, and skip town.”

“It’s not that; it’s—I dunno. I guess I just don’t have the proper incentive for this sort of thing.”

“Incentive?” roars Knuckles, when I relay this dialogue to him later. “What incentive does he need other than that I may break both of you into tiny bite-size pieces if the two of you don’t get with it pretty damn quick?” He glares at me and drums his fingers on the desk, leaving dents. “How’s about I give you one more week as an incentive? By then, either Locky gets his name on a diploma, or you get yours on a tombstone—how’s that?”

Well, it’s better than *not* having a week’s reprieve, I guess. At least, it gives me time to pick the next trial very carefully with due regard for incentives—including my staying alive.

Like many big men, Knuckles McCloskey is surprisingly light on his feet, and he nearly scares me out of my socks when he materializes out of the shadows as Lochinvar sets out on his final assignment, six days later. He is also surprisingly nervous, and gives the impression he would find it therapeutic to rend someone limb from limb. As I am the nearest candidate, this makes *me* rather nervous, too, despite the fact that I have spent the week putting Lochinvar through an intensive cram course.

"Did you case this place?" Knuckles wants to know.

"Yup."

"Kinda open, ain't it?"

"Yup."

"Is it rigged?"

"Yup."

"Good system?"

"Yup."

"Watchdogs?"

"Yup. Two Dobermans."

"Anybody home?"

"Yup. Everybody's in the family room."

"Where's the stash?"

"Should be in the upstairs study, where that balcony is."

Knuckles surveys the balcony dubiously. "You mean Locky's got to—"

"He just did. Didn't you see him?"

There is a note of awe in

Knuckles' voice as he admits that, no, he didn't see Lochinvar make his quiet, barely visible entry through the balcony window. He leans forward tautly, listening for sounds of alarm, and when none are forthcoming he relaxes somewhat, only to tense up again as headlights appear down the block. We both freeze in the shadows as a squad car tiptoes by, its crew peering sharply this way and that in search of malefactors.

"A prowler car, too!" Knuckles whispers. "You shoulda checked out its schedule, Kit."

"I did. It's right on time."

There is a familiar ratcheting noise and I see Knuckles toying with his .38 in a speculative way. "Looks to me like you're setting Locky up for something. You hadda pick a job where all the cards are stacked against him?"

"Well, did you want me to send him out to snatch candy from a baby? I thought you wanted him on a *real* job."

"Yeah, but—" Knuckles begins, then almost drops his .38 and his teeth as a voice behind him says, "Hi, Pop!"

It is Lochinvar, grinning broadly. "Got it!" he chortles, holding out a black bag.

Knuckles is stunned into a silence that lasts until we are back in his office, where he in-

sists that Lochinvar take him step by step through his first successful burglary—relating in detail the by-passing of the security system, the pacification of the two Dobermans, the athletic clamber up to the balcony, the all-but-noiseless entry, and the speedy but silent return trip—with the loot safe in the bag at his belt.

At the conclusion of the saga, Knuckles turns to me, his craggy face aglow with paternal pride. "You did it, Kit!" he crows. "The perfect heist! I knew Locky had it in him, and—" he winks and digs an elbow into my ribs, cracking three—all he needed was some incentive, right? Which reminds me," he adds, suddenly recalled to business. "Where's the swag?"

He dips into the bag. The McCloskey jaw drops. The McCloskey eyebrows ascend the McCloskey forehead as he hauls out a glass-lidded box.

"Bugs?" cries Knuckles.

"Moths," corrects Lochinvar. "The *Alypia octomaculata* specimens from the Howard Hottinger collection."

"Bugs?" repeats Knuckles, hollowly.

"Also known as the eight-spotted forester moth," Lochinvar continues. "Mr. Hottinger's collection of forty-three variants. Nothing else like it in the country!"

"Bugs!" mutters Knuckles, staring into space. He gives a little shudder. "I think I need a drink," he says, and totters out of the room.

Lochinvar, gazing after him, stirs uncomfortably and leans over to me. "I don't think I should mention it, do you?"

"Mention what?"

"Well, I felt sorta bad about taking some of Mr. Hottinger's best specimens, so I left him my grouping of virgin tiger moths—*Apantesis virgo*—found in the United States and Canada. I think," he concludes modestly, "it's almost as good a collection as his *Alypia*."

I goggle at him wordlessly. Somehow, I feel that Lochinvar has failed to grasp certain essentials of the profession. "Yes," I agree at last. "We'd better keep that our little secret." I sure don't want to be the one to tell Knuckles McCloskey that his son Lochinvar is incorrigible.

FICTION

Country Dance

by Clayton Matthews

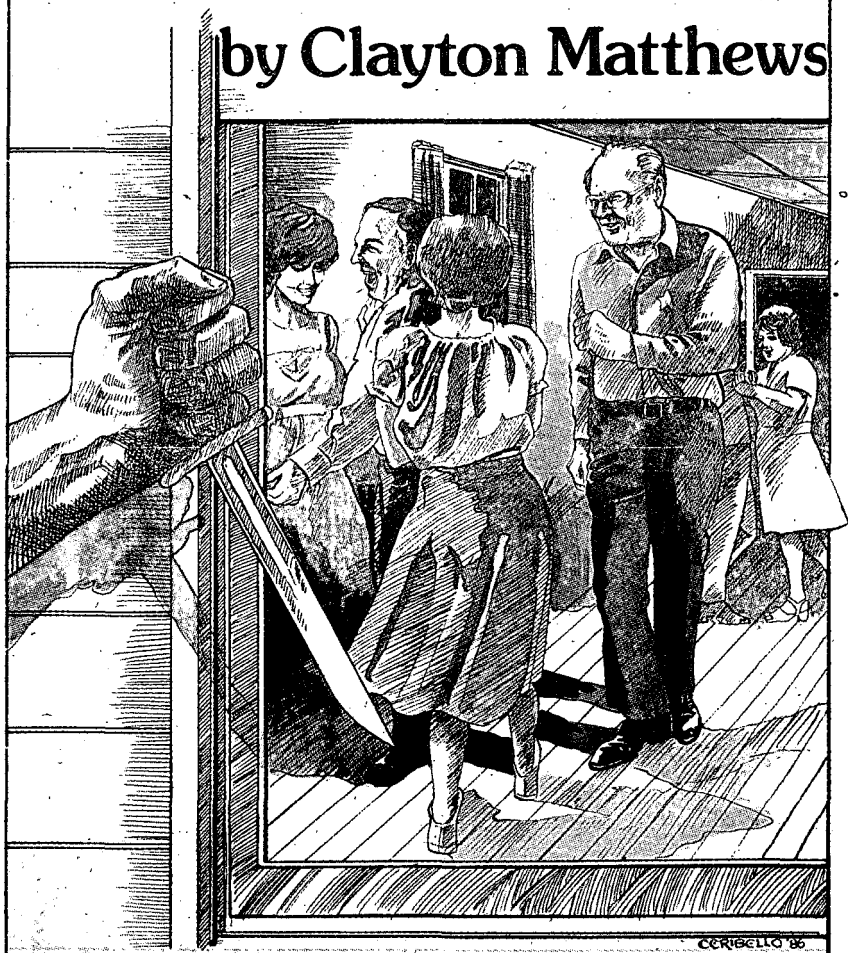


Illustration by Jim Ceribello

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There was a dance held in our schoolhouse once a year, a week before school started for the fall term. It was a tradition, I guess, but no one seemed to know how it had begun.

"I reckon it's so folks can let off a little steam, Kyle," Sheriff Jason Little told me one time. "Or maybe it's just because they're happy to be getting the younguns off their hands with school starting, plus the summer ending and all."

The schoolhouse was the only building in our little East Texas town large enough to hold a dance. Of course, there was the honky-tonk outside of town on the road to the county seat, but that was a different thing entirely.

The first school dance that I attended was memorable for two reasons. It *was* my first one, and it was to be the first public appearance of a new teacher for the school. The teacher was a man. All the other teachers were women. This was the thirties, you understand, deep in the Depression, and the job didn't really pay enough for a man.

There were already rumors about the new teacher, rumors to the effect that he had been a high school teacher over in Fort Worth, got involved in a scandal, and couldn't get another teaching job, except in a small town like ours.

Sheriff Jason was a member of the three-man school board responsible for hiring the teachers. I asked him about the rumors.

"I thought I'd taught you better than to listen to gossip, boy," he said gruffly. "We checked up on him. He's a good teacher. Anything happened in his personal life's not our business. Nor yours, Kyle."

"But why a man? We've always had women before."

"Because we thought it was high time a man was needed to handle you kids. Some of you boys, Lafe Brannan, for example, would make two of most women we hire."

That was true enough.

He wasn't quite finished. "And there's another thing . . . Since Cotton Haskins came back to town, too many of you boys have been hanging around him." He stared at me hard, and I felt my face burn. "I catch you hanging around that no-good, Kyle, and I'll smoke your backside!"

It was the custom for the school board members to take turns boarding new teachers. This was Sheriff Jason's year.

Sheriff Jason was only a deputy, but he was all the law our town had. We lived in a two-story white house about a mile out of town,

Sheriff Jason, Aunt Beth, and myself. Aunt Beth was Sheriff Jason's sister and kept house for us. I wasn't related to them at all. Sheriff Jason had taken me in to raise after my mother died.

That year I was seventeen, in my last year at the high school. There were never more than fifty students in the high school at any one time, and we had only four teachers for all four grades.

It had been a dry, hot summer the year Billie Bob Judson came to board with us. There had been no rain for three months. Our little valley was shaped like a boomerang, lying between two low ranges of hills. For two months the temperature had not dropped below ninety, day or night. The sandy soil glittered like bone dust under a scalding sun. It nurtured nothing. It grew almost nothing. The river was reduced to a mere trickle; a few deep pools could be found along the west bank. Lean catfish, their white bellies slimed with mud, lurked among the brown roots of the elms that arched up out of the ever-receding water like the ribs of starving giants.

It was on such a day that Mr. Judson trudged up the dusty lane toward our house, toting two worn suitcases.

It was just before sundown. Sheriff Jason and I were on the front porch, and Aunt Beth was in the kitchen fixing supper.

The man coming up the lane was wearing a suit and tie. Few people in our town wore a suit and tie except to funerals or to church. At the foot of the steps he set down his suitcases and looked up at us. "I'm Billie Bob Judson."

Sheriff Jason nodded. "Figured as much, the suit and all. Come up and set. Supper'll be on the table soon."

I watched him mount the steps. He was slight, wiry, well under six feet, and I had to wonder about Sheriff Jason's remark. *This* was the teacher who would handle us? He wasn't much bigger than some of the women teachers. Yet he moved with the coiled ease of a cat, and he had a sort of cocked-head awareness. I later learned that he had made All-American halfback a few years before with the TCU football team over in Forth Worth.

He sat down on the top step. "Whew! It's hot. And dry."

"It is that," Sheriff Jason said. "Ain't rained in three months." I stirred, making a sound. "This here is Kyle. He lives with us and he'll be going to school with you, come fall."

Funny thing, the new teacher was about the same size as Cotton Haskins, but there the resemblance ended. Cotton was a flashier dresser, usually wearing brown gabardine pants, dove-colored shirt

open at the throat, and tan, sharp-toed shoes. He got his name from his hair, which was the color of a cotton field at picking time. He had a scar running from high on his cheekbone down to the point of his chin on the left side of his face. It was puckered, an angry red in color, and stood out vividly against his pallid skin.

Sheriff Jason didn't have an office. But almost every afternoon he could be found in the shade of the filling station on the edge of town, sitting on an upended Nehi case, his old black pipe fuming, yarning with a couple of men. He told me once that he could handle ninety percent or more of his law problems from there. Most of his problems, he said, didn't amount to a hill of beans anyway.

It was there that I first saw Cotton, a hot afternoon about a month back. I was hunkered down beside Sheriff Jason when this dusty Model A Ford drove up, and a man got out. He told the attendant to put in five gallons of gas, then walked toward us.

All conversation stopped.

It was then that I saw the scar. I sucked in my breath, and his head swung toward me, cold gray eyes boring into mine. His hand came up to finger the scar. Then he grinned, slouching. He dug a two-bit piece out of his pocket and sent it spinning toward me.

"Get a bottle of pop out of the cooler, kid. One for yourself, too. Keep the change."

"Gee, thanks, mister!" I bent forward to scoop the coin out of the dirt.

"Leave it, Kyle," Sheriff Jason said harshly.

The newcomer switched his cold stare to Sheriff Jason. "Let's see . . . Sheriff Jason Little, ain't it? But as I recollect, the sheriff part don't mean all that much."

"And you'd be Cotton Haskins?"

"You've got it right."

"Why'd you come back to town, Cotton? The law hot on your tail?"

The gray eyes had the hard glitter of frost, and the two men locked stares for a long moment. The contrast between the two was strong, Sheriff Jason, plump, balding, aging, usually beaming with good nature, Cotton, slim, sinisterly good-looking, around thirty, rarely smiling.

From the gas pump the attendant called out something and Cotton relaxed. "I reckon that's for you to find out . . . sheriff."

Cotton got into the Model A and, pulling away, gunned it, making a sound like a snarl of contempt.

"Who was that?" I asked.

"Cotton?" Sheriff Jason took a pull on his pipe. "Cotton's our local badman, I guess you could say. He was always in some kind of trouble. Some years back, before your time here, Kyle, he got into a cutting scrape out to the honkytonk. That's where he got the scar. He cut up another old boy pretty bad, then lit out. The way I hear it, he's been running in bad company since, people like the Ma Barker bunch. I even heard that he was with John Dillinger for a spell."

I guess all of us find a certain fascination about a bad man. Cotton wasn't really an outlaw, but he was about as close to one as I'd ever known personally.

I saw Cotton off and on for the next few weeks. Not that I buddied around with him, I was hardly close enough to his age for that. Our town wasn't big enough to support a pool hall, but there was a room behind the barber shop which held two tables and chairs. There was almost always a domino game going, sometimes a game called moon. Moon was a gambling game, and it wasn't played much as a rule. That changed after Cotton Haskins came back to town. He was in the back room nearly every day, playing moon for table stakes. Sure, gambling was against the law back then, but any law officer trying to arrest anybody for playing moon for money would have been laughed clear out of the county.

Nobody cared if kids were around. Oh, maybe our folks would have. I was sure that Sheriff Jason would have lit into me good, but the players liked to have us underfoot. Now and then a winner would send us across the street to the general store for cold pop, tobacco, or cigarettes, and give us a dime for our trouble.

I'd never hung around the domino parlor much before. But I was curious about Cotton. He seemed to always have money, and he won more often than he lost.

He was also good for stories about Ma Barker and her boys, Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker, and John Dillinger. He never came right out and *said* he had been with them, but he didn't deny it, either. He just smiled when asked outright.

These people were as well-known to us as movie stars are today, and we kids listened open-mouthed. The grownups also listened, with strong interest. You have to understand that this was the time of bank failures. Almost everybody you could name had lost money in some bank failure. No one openly approved of bank robbing, but many folks secretly rooted for the robbers. I reckon you

could say John Dillinger and the others were sort of folk heroes. We had few heroes in those dark days of the Great Depression.

A few times Cotton took some of us riding in his Model A, sending it bucketing down the country roads trailing a cloud of dust.

One time I rode alone with Cotton. He had a pint bottle of whisky on the seat between us. He kept nipping at it. "I didn't know Jason Little had any kids."

"I'm not related." I explained how I'd come to live with Sheriff Jason and Aunt Beth.

Cigarette dropping from the corner of his mouth, Cotton said, "An orphan, huh? Me too, kid. Don't take any guff from anybody; or they'll tromp all over you." He touched a forefinger to the scar. "Always look out for Number One, that's the secret. It's a dog eat dog world, kid, kill or be killed . . ." I made a sound, scrooching back into the seat corner, and his lips peeled back from his teeth. His laughter grated. "Sure, kid, I've killed one or two. Did you ever hear about the time old Johnnie carved a bar of soap up to look like a pistol, then rubbed shoe polish on it, and used it to bust out of jail?"

I listened, spellbound, as he talked through drifting cigarette smoke of John Dillinger, the Ford bouncing in and out of chug holes.

I didn't see too much of the new teacher at first. He kept pretty much to himself, either in his room reading, or walking along the river bottom down from the house a ways. Mr. Judson wasn't unfriendly. He ate with us and sometimes sat with us in the evenings on the porch, but he rarely talked unless spoken to.

One night after supper, the three of us sat on the porch, with the teacher off on the river bottom. I said, "He sure don't talk much for a teacher!"

"I reckon he will, Kyle, when the time comes," Sheriff Jason said around his pipe. "I always did admire a man who talked only when need be."

"I'd guess woman trouble, Jason," Aunt Beth said unexpectedly. "He acts like a man with a woman on his mind."

Sheriff Jason cleared his throat. "I expect it's his business, sis. Have you been gossiping with the wives again?"

"And I suppose you men don't gossip down there at that old filling station?"

"Not as much as you women, Beth," Sheriff Jason said mildly.

Aunt Beth sniffed. "Well, it just ain't right, to my way of thinking, to hire a teacher who may have been involved in some scandal or other."

"Sis, I don't think this is the place to . . ."

I got up and marched inside before one or the other got around to saying, "Little pitchers have big ears."

I wasn't all that little any more, but I knew it wouldn't do any good to say anything.

There weren't enough boys in our high school to field a football team, but we did have enough for a basketball squad, and we always started practice long before the opening of the school term. A few days after the new teacher arrived, I had an idea. "Teacher, we have a basketball team."

"Good, Kyle! I think that's a fine idea."

"Thing is, we don't win many games. We've never had a real coach. Reckon you could coach us?"

He flashed a startled look at me, then grinned slowly. "Well now, I don't see why not. I've never coached basketball, but I did coach a high school football team in Forth-Worth once." His narrow face went bleak. "Yes, Kyle, I'll be your coach, if you're sure you want me."

I took him at his word and hustled him over to the schoolhouse that very afternoon. Our high school wasn't the traditional one-room red schoolhouse. It was built of weathered bricks instead of painted boards, and could handle twice the number of kids usually in school. It had been built at a time when our town was larger, more prosperous.

Our basketball court was outside, on hard-packed earth, but it did have two basketball backboards. The basket netting had long since rotted away, leaving the bare hoops. There were seven of us altogether, ranging in size from Lafe Brannan, who was eighteen, and six feet tall, down to Dave Williams, who was fourteen, and about five four. Lafe had been in the eleventh grade for two years and probably would have been passed out but for the fact that his father owned the general store and was a member of the school board.

The teacher lined us up, practicing hoop shots in rotation. Lafe eyed the teacher slyly all the while. Finally he couldn't resist the temptation to show off.

When it came his turn under the basket, he spun out of line with

the ball, dribbled it a few feet, then yelled to a boy almost his own size. They started passing the ball back and forth between them.

Dave Williams, who was next in line behind Lafe, jumped up and down. "It's my turn, pass it to me!"

"Your turn?" Lafe jeered. "Come get it, runt!"

Dave ran at him, and they arched the ball over his head. Then Lafe glanced over at me. "Here, Kyle, catch!"

He threw the ball at me. I stepped out of line and caught it.

"Kyle, throw it to me!" Dave yelled.

Feeling somewhat ashamed of myself, I ignored him and passed it back to Lafe. We tossed the basketball between the pair of us for a little while.

Dave kept jumping for it, but he wasn't nearly tall enough. He started to bawl in frustration.

Suddenly I heard a sharp voice, "What's going on here?"

"Why, nothing, teacher," Lafe said, all innocence. "We're just practicing, like you said to."

"Practice means teamwork, it means you all take part."

"Sure, teacher."

Lafe threw the ball at me again, and I caught it. I was thoroughly ashamed of myself now and didn't dare look at Mr. Judson, but I still followed Lafe's lead.

"What's your name?" the teacher demanded.

"Lafe, teacher, Lafe Brannan."

"Give me the ball, Lafe."

Lafe clutched the ball to his chest. "You gonna make me, teacher?"

I looked at Mr. Judson, holding my breath. He stood perfectly still for a long moment. Then he moved in an astonishing blur of speed. He slapped the ball from Lafe's grasp, and it bounced away across the hard ground.

Lafe stood gaping, arms akimbo. The teacher moved again. He seized Lafe's ear between thumb and forefinger. Lafe yelped and sank to his knees.

"Are you a pupil here?" He twisted Lafe's ear.

"Yes! I'm in the eleventh grade!"

"Not any more you're not. You're a bully and I can't stomach bullies."

"You can't do that. My daddy's on the school board."

"I don't care what your daddy is. Long as I'm a teacher here, you're not coming to school."

"I'll tell Cousin Cotton," Lafe whined.

"Cousin Cotton?"

I spoke up, "Teacher, Lafe is cousin to Cotton Haskins."

"Haskins? You mean that gangster who's going around bragging about knowing Dillinger and all the rest of that scum? If I were you, Lafe, I wouldn't be claiming kin to such trash."

Lafe jumped like a hooked catfish. "I'll tell Cotton what you said!"

"I expect you will. While you're at it, tell him this for me . . . His kind belongs in prison."

Sheriff Jason sang:

"All jump up and never come down
Swing your partner round and round
Till the hollow of your foot
Makes a hole in the ground!
And promenade, boys, promenade!"

I knew that Sheriff Jason usually called the square dances, but I'd never heard him before. He had the harsh, carrying voice needed to make himself heard over the band, a Western combo of guitar, fiddle, bass fiddle, and a banjo.

Almost the whole town was there, the girls in colorful dresses and short flaring skirts showing bare legs, the young men in tight pants, fancy shirts, some wearing cowboy boots. The older folks were dressed as usual, a few of the men in suits, the others in overalls round as stovepipes in the legs and large, bulb-toed shoes. The women were mostly in cotton dresses, moving about in whispering, deep-skirted secrecy.

All the desks were pushed back against the walls, clearing the floor for dancing. Tables had been set up at one end of the big room, loaded with food: crisp fried chicken, thick cornbread yellow as butter, sliced tomatoes and black-eyed peas, cold buttermilk, watermelon pickles, and rich pound cake.

It was a hot, sultry night. Thunderheads had boiled up late in the afternoon, but no rain had fallen as yet. The hills to the east had been capped with black clouds as we walked to the schoolhouse at dusk.

All the young people and several of the older folks were dancing. Everyone appeared to be having a good time.

Yet there was an undercurrent beneath the gaiety. It was resentment aimed at Mr. Judson, of course. Some were openly hostile.

Folks didn't like what he'd done to Lafe. They felt he had no right to come down so hard on a pupil before school had even started.

Even Sheriff Jason had spoken to Mr. Judson about it on the way to the schoolhouse earlier. "You went off half-cocked there, didn't you, hoss?"

"I don't think so, Mr. Little. The boy will only cause trouble when school starts and will have to be expelled sooner or later. Don't you agree? That's why you hired me. You said the women couldn't handle some of the older boys."

"Yeah, I agree. But . . ." Sheriff Jason had sighed. "All I can say is, stay out of Frank Brannan's way tonight. He's hot under the collar. Oh, not that he'd do anything but carry on. He's a blowhard. Lafe gets his bullying ways from his daddy."

I kept waiting for Mr. Judson and Frank Brannan to come face to face. Brannan was a big, red-faced man with a loud voice and popping eyes.

Something else happened first.

I was watching Mr. Judson, who was at a table between dances gnawing on a chicken leg and talking to Sheriff Jason, when somebody brushed past me. It was Cotton Haskins, trailing whisky fumes. I hurried after him.

He stopped right behind Mr. Judson. "Eat good, schoolteacher. Eat real good. It may be your last."

The teacher turned slowly. "You're Cotton Haskins?"

"That's me, schoolteacher." Cotton was weaving slightly on the balls of his feet. "Lafe told me about all them things you said about me. You want to take them back in front of all these folks?"

The room grew silent as a graveyard at midnight.

"No, Haskins," Mr. Judson said steadily. "I'm taking nothing back because everything I said is true."

Cotton seemed to shudder. "That's the way it's going to be, is it?"

"That's the way it is."

Cotton's hand came up to finger the scar. "Then you'd better walk real careful from now on." His voice was little more than a rasping whisper. "I hear you're pretty good at hiding behind women's skirts. We'll see how good you are at facing up to somebody besides a schoolkid!"

Cotton turned on his heel. As he strode past me, his pale eyes were blind. He shoved people out of his way and plunged through the door.

The silence ended then. People clustered in small groups, talking

in low voices. Everybody, except Sheriff Jason, avoided Billie Bob Judson. Sheriff Jason was talking to him with many gestures. I edged in close. Sheriff Jason broke off to give me an angry look. I turned aside to pick up a chicken leg. I munched on it without tasting a thing.

Soon, the band started up again, and Sheriff Jason joined them. As he began calling the next dance, I saw the teacher moving through the crowd toward the door.

I followed him outside.

The rain started not too long after that. It came down in buckets. I was soaked through when I came back inside. I huddled in one corner, shivering uncontrollably.

The dancing had stopped. The people were gathered at the windows looking out at the pouring rain. I saw a few standing outside, faces upturned toward the heavens as though in a silent prayer of thanksgiving that the dry spell had broken.

"Looks like old Mother Nature finally decided to be good to us." Sheriff Jason ranged alongside me, peering out. "Have you seen Billie Bob, Kyle? He's been gone a long time, seems to me."

"I . . ."

A man burst through the door. "We just found the teacher! He's dead!"

Sheriff Jason started at a lumbering run for the door, and I went along in his wake.

Billie Bob Judson was lying on his back near the basketball backboard. His eyes were open and sightless, the water sluicing off his body.

Sheriff Jason dropped to one knee and raised him off the ground by one shoulder. The gravel under the body was dry. In his back, just below the left shoulder blade, were two small but deep knife wounds. The area around the wounds was bloodsoaked.

Sheriff Jason stood up slowly. He looked at the men clustered silently around. "Let's get him inside."

Mr. Judson was laid out on the platform the band had been using. Someone spread a raincoat over him. The room was silent except for the sounds of shuffling feet.

Sheriff Jason let his glance roam over them, finally settling on Frank Brannan. "Where's your Cousin Cotton, Frank?"

Brannan started. "Huh?" Comprehension flooded his popping eyes. "Jason, you ain't thinking this is Cotton's doing?"

"He threatened the teacher earlier. You all heard him."

All of a sudden Cotton was there, slender and deadly and sneering. "You have something to say to me, *sheriff*?"

"You sneaked up behind Billie Bob and slipped a knife into his back. Twice."

"I hear you talking, sheriff," Cotton said. "Words. You can't prove a thing!"

The crowd began closing around him as though in protection. Mutters crackled through them like heat lightning.

"He's right, Jason. No proof."

"Shouldn't have picked on Lafe for no reason."

"High and mighty schoolteacher. No trouble until he come here. Anyone's to blame, he was!"

They moved in a body toward Sheriff Jason, menace darkening their faces.

"No!" The word was torn from me. I forced my way between Sheriff Jason and the crowd. "Sheriff Jason is right! Cotton did kill the teacher!"

Cotton gaped at me. "What're you saying, kid?"

"I saw you! You snuck up behind him in the dark and . . . You shouldn't've done that! You didn't meet him face to face like you promised."

The crowd receded from him, like two waves breaking on each side, leaving him all alone. Cotton's knife was out, the blade snick-ing. He held it low, arm extended.

"You little punk," he said in a grating voice, "I ought to slice you open like a watermelon!"

"In the dark, in the back maybe, Cotton?" Sheriff Jason nudged me aside. "Me first, Cotton, before you can get to Kyle, and you haven't the guts for that. Not with all the folks watching. Look around you, Cotton."

Cotton's glance darted right, then left. The crowd was closing in again, but not protectively this time.

"Now wait!" Cotton cried. "He had no business coming in here and stirring up trouble for us!"

One man said, "Us? You're not one of us, Cotton."

They moved closer. With a strident cry Cotton dropped the knife and tried to get away. He disappeared as they swarmed on him.

In a moment the crowd drew back. Cotton was held between two brawny men in overalls. His head hung on his chest and he was sobbing.

With a sigh Sheriff Jason said, "Take him down to the icehouse and lock him in. I'll be along in a little while and drive him over to the county seat."

A few minutes later I stood in the doorway to the schoolhouse with Sheriff Jason and watched everybody leave, scattering in different directions toward their homes. The dance was over. The rain had stopped, but the rumble of thunder held the promise of more to come.

I said, "I don't understand. First, they were against you, then they turned on Cotton. I thought they would tear him apart."

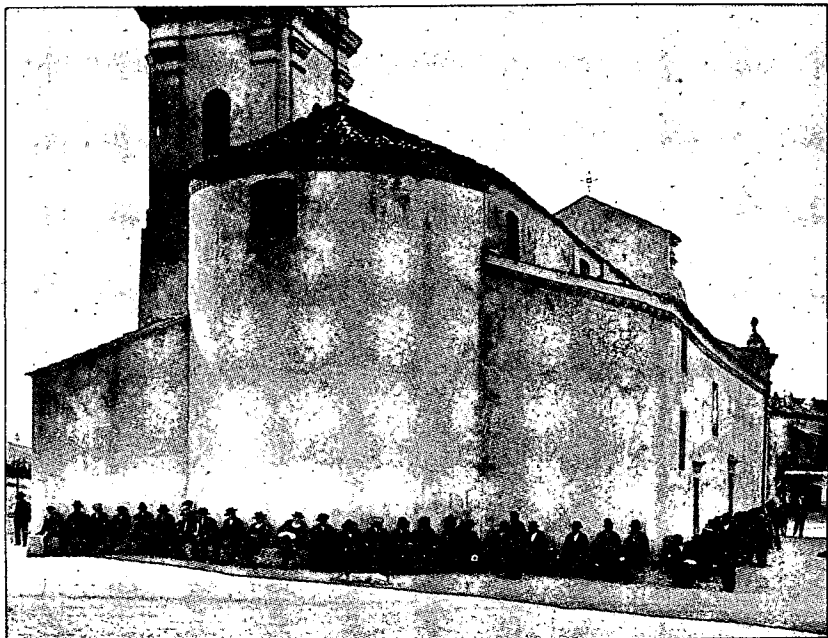
"Folks are hard to figure. I reckon they didn't want to admit to themselves that Cotton could do a thing like that. Then, when they knew he did it, they *had* to turn on him. Maybe they felt they somehow had a hand in killing Billie Bob." His hand descended gently on my shoulder. "You did real good, Kyle. I'm right proud of you."

"I . . . I didn't want to speak up like I did."

"I figured as much. You know something, boy? When I was your age, I thought Billie the Kid was the greatest thing ever walked the face of this old earth."

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THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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There he is! The fourth man from the right! We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the January Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

Tide in the Affairs

by Bill Crenshaw

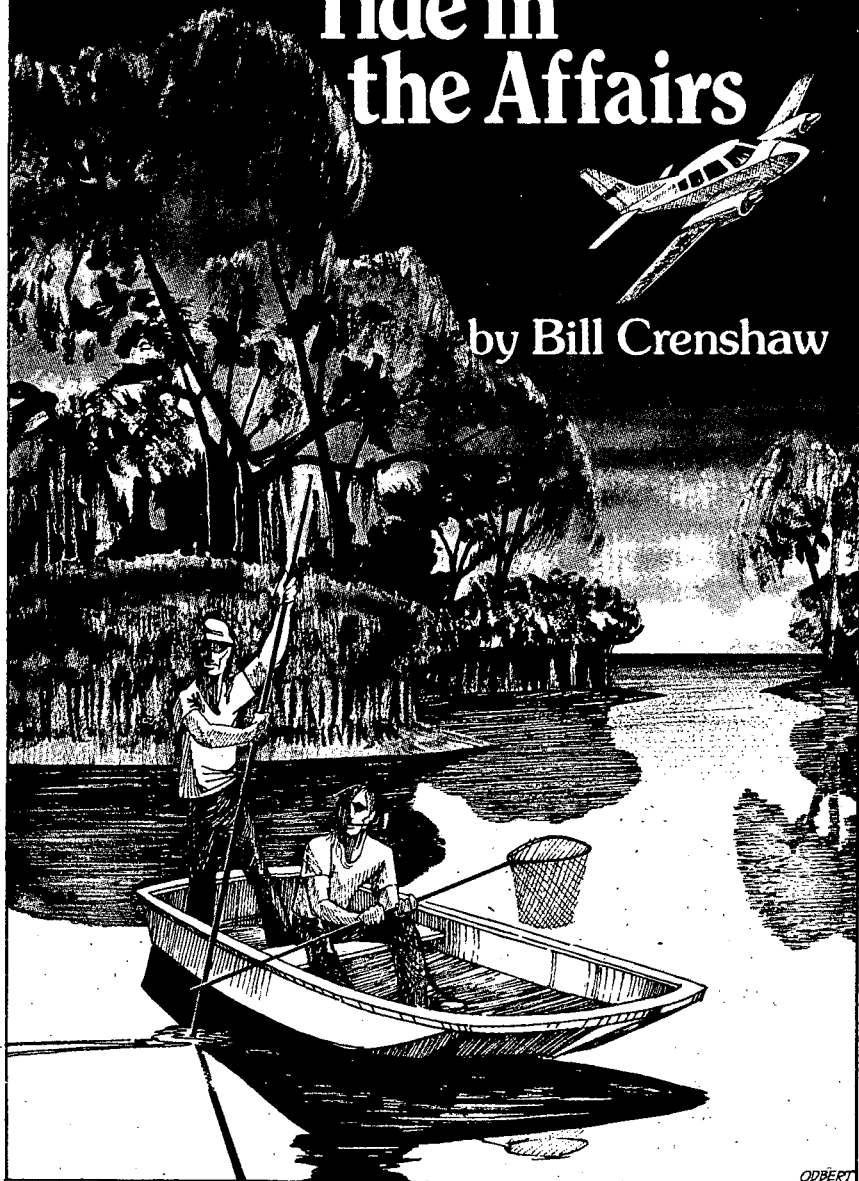


Illustration by Jim Odbert

ODBERT

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“**T**his *can't* be the right road,” said Adameus Clay, leaning over the steering wheel as the car crept along the narrow, hard-packed washboard of sand and crushed shell. The vibrations rattled his teeth and bounced his glasses on his nose and were shaking loose, he feared, every nut and bolt in Brunhilde's venerable frame. In the back seat the twins eyed each other with chins up and mouths wide, holding long notes that the road jounced into vibratos, sustaining them as long as they could before collapsing into breathless giggles.

Ginger studied the map jiggling in her hands. “It *is* the right road.”

The road wound beneath an arch of twisted oaks and looping vines and great grey beards of Spanish moss; on either side rose palms and palmettos, and the undergrowth was broad-leaved, spiky or waxy or fleshy, unnatural outside the glass walls of a hothouse. It was all too primordial for Adam, something that should have died out with the tyrannosaur.

“We should be near the Lower Turtle Branch,” said Ginger.

“The what?”

Ginger pointed. The road dipped toward a narrow bridge over a thin stream. A sign said “Lower Turtle Branch.” Adam

squinted into the shadows and saw that the road was filled with thumb-sized fiddler crabs, each waving its outrageously huge claw as if to flag down the car. Adam slowed even more, and the crabs scuttled out of the way.

Adam was accustomed to more civilized vacations. Before the twins, he and Ginger had saved up and treated themselves each year to two weeks abroad. Since the twins, they had been nowhere, until Ginger surprised Adam with vacation plans. “We’ve got to get out of town,” she had said when she told him that she had reserved a cabin in a state park on the coast. “It’s inexpensive. We need a break. And we haven’t been to the beach in years.” Adam had tried to smile. For him the beach meant sandwiches with real sand.

“Are you sure this is the right road?”

“Adam.”

“Well, it just seems a bit remote.”

Ginger wiped the sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand. “Rumrunners landed here. Edward Teach landed here. Where’s your sense of adventure?”

“Teach?”

“Blackbeard, Adam. The pirate.”

The trees began to thin and

a house appeared beyond a curve, complete, to Adam's relief, with a park ranger in a Smokey the Bear hat and a high-riding, four wheel drive, official state park jeep with two little girls peeping out at them as they pulled up.

"Your cabin is just a half mile on down," the ranger said. "Number three. Right on the creek. If you need me for anything, just leave word at the office. Ask for Burris Wardlaw."

Adam found the words "right on the creek" disquieting. The air was already wet enough, the mosquitoes thick enough. He didn't need to be any closer to water. But the sight of the ranger's house cheered him—if that was what they meant by "cabin," then roughing it wouldn't be so rough.

That was not what they meant by "cabin."

"Kind of small, isn't it?" Adam said, leaning into a bathroom the size of a closet. There were no closets of any size. There was no air conditioner, no television, no radio, no telephone. There was an oscillating fan screwed into one wall.

"One leaves home," said Ginger evenly, "for a change of scene and routine. Change means different. Different things are different. It won't kill you. Force yourself to have a good time. Take the girls to

the creek or something while I get supper."

Adam drenched the twins and himself with insect repellent and headed out into the land of mosquitoes, the air filled with the metallic roar of scores of cicadas.

Big Turtle Creek was twenty-five or thirty yards wide, snaking through the vast tidal marsh separating them from Fishhook Island a half mile away. Adam took a twin's hand in each of his and guided them onto a narrow boardwalk leading down to a crabbing dock. The tide was low and the twins leaned over the boardwalk and babbled at the fiddler crabs dancing across the grey-brown mud. A stiff breeze blew from the marsh. The smell was richly fetid. On a half-submerged tree, mussels spat little silver arcs of water into the salty creek as if in futile protest. Adam knew just how they felt.

After supper they drove back down the washboard and crossed the causeway to Fishhook Island to explore and see where the park beach and the grocery store and the laundromat were. Adam caught himself staring at first row beach houses, into whose upper story his cabin might be dropped with room to spare.

At dusk, with the twins already in bed, Ginger dragged

Adam onto the screened porch that ran the width of the cabin and put his book and a glass of iced tea on the wide arms of a formidable porch chair, low-slung, wooden-slatted, its back fanning out like a seashell. Adam eased into it and found that it, like Ginger, meant business. Getting up again was almost impossible. Relax, the chair said, or else.

The breeze off the tidal marsh was cool and free of the noise of cities. Across Big Turtle Creek and the marshes Adam could see the darkening hump of Fishhook Island and the lights of the few homes in the thick trees on its near side. Then from the far side, perhaps right on the beach, fireworks slipped into the sky, strangely silent at this distance, a quiet-pop coming some seconds after the green flash faded. Adam could hear crickets now, and frogs, the drone of a light plane headed landward, the breeze hissing through the grasses of the flats and rattling the palmetto fronds. A pair of headlights appeared like little eyes on the island; the sound of a small boat motor drifted up off Big Turtle as Fishhookers did whatever it was they did at whatever time and tide it was. These were new and natural rhythms, and Adam began to feel that things were rather pleasant with no tele-

phone and no TV and the mosquitoes' thin whine safely beyond the screens. He felt himself relax.

There was a sudden pounding at the back door, and a voice booming out across the tidal flats, startling all nature into silence. "Surprise, surprise," the voice thundered. It was Fat Chance, a six pack of beer in each hand.

Fat Chance had known for weeks, he said, that his life-and-casualty convention on Fishhook Island coincided with their vacation. He was immensely pleased with himself. "Really surprised you, huh?" he asked more than once during the evening. "Oh, yes," Ginger and Adam would answer. "Really."

Fat Chance asked how they liked the cabin, and Adam, with a quick glance to Ginger, said how much he liked it, how one left home for a change of scene and routine, to get new perspectives and things.

"Kinda primitive, though, huh?" said Fat Chance, looking around.

"Different," said Adam. "Different is, well . . . different."

"I'm not into primitive," Fat Chance said. He and some insurance buddies had rented a first row beach house and were not exactly roughing it. "Twelve

hundred smackers a week. Water beds. Jacuzzi. One of those projection TV's, Adam," he said, stretching out his hands as if describing the one that got away. "VCR and lots of movies. Cable, too. MTV. You ever see MTV?" His eyes got wide and he shook his hand as if his fingertips were on fire.

"Is it air-conditioned?" Adam asked in spite of himself. Fat Chance stared at him as if he were crazy. Ginger just stared.

When Fat Chance left, he left his beer in their refrigerator. That meant he intended to return.

The morning sun was still low as Adam loaded the car with beach blankets and floats and towels and lotions, muttering to himself. Ginger wasn't happy with him, and he didn't want to spoil the vacation. He would have to try harder to enjoy things. He had dreamed of air conditioning.

As they were leaving, Ranger Wardlaw and his little girls pulled up. He had seen Fat Chance drive by the night before.

"He's my wife's brother," said Adam, to let Wardlaw know that the relationship was legal, not natural.

"Well, I didn't mean to seem nosy, but we like to keep a pretty close watch on things.

Just wanted to make sure he had a reason to be back here." He recommended the day care at the park beach for the twins. "Gives grownups a chance to relax. That's what the beach is for, right?"

Ginger looked at Adam and smiled.

An hour later, Adam was hunched on a blanket under a beach umbrella, a terrycloth hat low on his face, wearing sunglasses and an unbuttoned flowery shirt. He was watching people go by with that peculiar barefoot beach walk that seems to embody self-assurance. They were tan, and their tummies were flat like boards, and their suits looked as if they were made during a cloth shortage. Adam never tanned. Adam's tummy was pale and pudgy. Adam's suit was the length of Bermuda shorts.

Ginger had already been in the water, played with the twins in the shallow pool left by the ebbing tide, was now reading in the sun at the tidal pool's edge, alternating chapters of Jane Austen and John le Carré. Adam had not left the shade of the umbrella.

Then in the distance he saw Fat Chance rolling across the sand toward him. At first Adam thought he was naked, and for a second it was difficult to breathe. Then he saw that Fat

Chance wore the briefest of swimming trunks, the same kind worn by all of the flat-tummiéd tans with their Warner Brothers walks.

"Hiya, Sis," said Fat Chance.

"Marvyn," greeted Ginger without looking up from *Pride and Prejudice*.

Fat Chance bent down with his hands on his knees and peered under the umbrella as if he were looking into a cave. "Is that you all hidden in there, Adameus Clay?" he shouted.

"Hello, Marvyn," said Adam weakly.

"Sis, I need to borrow your hubby for a while. I want to show him our fancy pad."

"Oh, uh," said Adam, "thanks anyway, but I need to stay here and help watch the twins."

"Oh, no," said Ginger, smiling maliciously. "You go ahead."

Adam stared down the long white beach that stretched to the resort end of the island. It would be a walk.

"Enjoy yourself," Ginger said.

Adam was sweating from the walk, and the air conditioning in the beach house was like wind off a glacier. He buttoned his shirt.

"Want a beer?" Fat Chance said.

Adam wasn't sure he had heard right. "It's not even ten o'clock."

"Yeah. Want a beer?"

Adam took a cola.

"Hey," Fat Chance yelled to the group knotted around the projection TV. "Who's got my eyes?"

"Top deck," somebody yelled back.

Fat Chance took Adam to the upper of two decks that wrapped around the house. They sat at a round metal table with an umbrella the size of a tent rising from its center. "My eyes," said Fat Chance, picking up a pair of binoculars. "I tell ya, Adam, this is the life." He propped his feet in an empty chair and scanned the bodies stretched out and oiled on the sand below.

"Don't you have meetings?" asked Adam.

"You been to a convention?"

"I used to go to MLA every year, and . . ."

"How were the meetings?"

"Well, some papers were . . ."

"Boring, right? Mostly just godawful boring."

Adam could not say no.

"I'm on vacation, so I'm vacationing." He laughed. Adam smiled a little. "You want a peek?" he said, offering the binoculars.

Adam shook his head.

"So," Fat Chance said, scanning the beach again, "how are you going to vacate today?"

"Oh, I thought I'd get some

reading in, maybe take a nap . . . ”

“What are you talking, nap? What is this?”

“Well, you know,” Adam said defensively, “I want to get away from the routine, relax . . . ”

“Adam, this is not why God made beaches. He made beaches so that you’ll have something to feel guilty about when you get back home. It’s one long party down here. Take this guy up the beach, that fancy house, the one with three decks. He does a little fireworks show every night. Not just the Fourth. Every night. These people are always on vacation. They maybe sleep in the daytime, but they never take naps.” He finished his beer. “What are you cooking out tonight?”

“Cooking out?”

Fat Chance looked horrified. “You at least gotta cook out, Adam. That cabin even has like a permanent grill outside. I mean, it’s like it’s required, almost.”

“I’ve never actually cooked out anything myself.”

Fat Chance’s eyes got wide, and he started to say something but refrained. “Time you learned,” he said finally. “Can’t risk steaks. Hamburgers’ll do.”

“I don’t know, Marvyn.”

“Sure, you do. And it’ll show Sis you’re having a good time.”

“How’d you know about that?”

“Adam, I’m her little brother, remember?”

That was something Adam could not forget.

Back at the park beach Adam tried to show Ginger he was having a good time. He frolicked in the waves with the twins. He picked up seashells. He paddled out beyond the breakers on their little raft and bobbed for a while on the swell. For a few minutes he even lay out in the sun.

At eleven they gave the beach to the crowds and the heat. Adam was encased in a body shell of salt; he couldn’t get the water out of his ears; he had stepped on half a dozen sandspurs; the steering wheel burned his hands and the seats stuck to his thighs; Brunhilde was filling with shell fragments and sand. The sunburn, the stiff back, and the sore muscles did not manifest themselves until later that afternoon, about the time he picked up Fat Chance to shop for the cookout.

It seemed to Adam, as he maneuvered the grocery cart through the narrow aisles, that it was taking rather a lot of stuff just to cook out a few hamburgers, but he dutifully picked up whatever Fat Chance pointed to, knowing that he was just going to have to trust him.

The bill came to nearly

fifty dollars. Adam was aghast.

"You gotta lighten up," said Fat Chance as they put the two bags into the trunk. "You worry about things all the time and you'll never have any fun. Boy, you got a red nose."

They hit the washboard road, and Fat Chance held the same long note that the twins had; laughing at his own quavering voice.

"I'm worried that this vibrating will hurt Brunhilde," said Adam.

"Good Lordy, Adam, no wonder," said Fat Chance, sliding across the seat. "What you need here is *speed*." He planted his left foot on Adam's right and Brunhilde shot forward toward the Lower Turtle Branch. "Ya-hooooo," Fat Chance howled. Adam just glimpsed the fiddler crabs waving and scurrying away in vain as he aimed Brunhilde for the middle of the bridge.

He had to admit that the ride was smoother.

Fat Chance introduced him to cooking out and its attendant rituals as if initiating him into arcane mysteries complete with sacred objects and ingredients and incantations, and as Fat Chance finally laid the patties hissing and popping on the grill, beer sloshing from the can in his left hand, Adam saw him in the late afternoon sun as an

Agamemnon on the windy plains of Troy, burning the bone and fat, pouring libations on the dusty earth, trying to propitiate Apollo, perhaps, for going too far, for wanting to keep Chryseis.

"Okay, Adameus," said Fat Chance turning from the grill and handing Adam the spatula and meat fork, passing them on, as it were, to the new generation. "She's all yours."

The flies started coming about then, and the mosquitoes, and the patties crumbled at Adam's touch, dropping little bits of meat onto the grey and glowing charcoal, where they smoked and flared and blackened. The breeze kept the heat and fumes in Adam's face, and his eyes watered and he couldn't see and breathing was at best unpleasant. Time crawled.

"Marvyn," he called. "Are these done yet?"

"You're the chef," Fat Chance answered from the screened safety of the porch. "How do they look?"

Adam leaned over the grill, fanning the smoke away furiously. He saw small dark disks above the flames.

They looked burned to a crisp, he thought. "They look done," he shouted.

"You're the chef," said Fat Chance.

Adam got the patties onto a

plate-as best as he could, flicking away whatever soot he saw.

The burgers were bright pink in the center, tending toward the raw side of rare.

"Not bad for the first time," said Fat Chance.

"Pretty good, honey," said Ginger.

The twins wouldn't touch theirs.

"I can put them back," Adam offered.

"No, no," said Ginger. "These are fine."

Adam smiled and took another bite from the edge. Everybody sat and ate slowly and fanned at the flies in the early dusk. Nobody asked for seconds.

A little later, while Ginger was getting the twins bathed, Adam sneaked the leftover hamburgers onto the dock and dropped them into the Big Turtle.

"Gotcha," said Fat Chance from behind him, laughing. "Feeding the crabs?"

Adam was mortified.

"Don't sweat it," said Fat Chance. "It takes practice. Just practice on somebody else next time. But you got to admit it beats taking naps."

Adam said he didn't have to admit any such thing.

"No pain," said Fat Chance, "no gain."

Across the creek and the tidal

marsh, beyond the trees on Fishhook Island, fireworks exploded into green and yellow starbursts. The tide was high now, covering the mud banks and all but the tips of the marsh grasses, and the fireworks were reflected in the water.

"That's my neighbor," said Fat Chance. "You see it better on the beach. I'd like to live like that." He looked up. "Or like that."

Adam followed his gaze to the small plane crossing Fishhook Island, heading inward.

"Twin engines," said Fat Chance. "That baby's got some range on it. Some dude just winging back in from a day in the Bahamas."

Adam thought he saw something falling from the plane, small and hard to see in the deepening dusk. They lost it before it hit the marsh. "It looked like a plastic trashbag," said Fat Chance, laughing. "Some tycoon tossing his trash."

"Disgusting," said Adam.

"I must not have seen you dump those hamburgers?" said Fat Chance, and laughed harder.

"That's not the same," Adam protested.

Fat Chance laughed harder still. Adam tried to ignore him. He turned back to look at the fireworks, but they had stopped. He could hear the putter of a

small boat, and make out a low shape across the marshes and a thin beam of light swinging back and forth across the reeds.

"What kind of things can you catch out here?" asked Adam, watching the boat.

"Crabs. Shrimp. You like crab?"

Adam shrugged. "It's okay."

"Okay? You never had *my* crab. Tomorrow we'll go crabbing and I'll make you a meal what's a meal."

Adam insisted that such trouble was not necessary; Fat Chance insisted it was no trouble at all, and part of Adam's education. Adam was too weary to argue. He couldn't see the boat now, and Fishhook Island was disappearing into marsh and sky, almost invisible except for lights in the widely spaced houses and the headlights that appeared almost directly across the waters, painting twin cones of yellow through the reeds before going out. He wanted to stay on the dock for a while to watch the stars, but he wanted to get off his feet more, and into one of those rocking chairs, or the chair that meant business.

On the porch, while Ginger and Fat Chance exchanged remember-when stories of their childhood that sent them into paralytic fits of laughter, Adam fell asleep to dream of pirates.

The next morning Adam was stiff in places he didn't know he had and was in no condition to go with Ginger on the park's shell-ing expedition, bending over four or five miles of sand. Even to think about it made his back ache. "And anyway," he said, "Marvyn is going to teach me how to catch crabs."

"Well," said Ginger with a perfectly straight face, "I know how much you've been looking forward to that." She left strict instructions to pick up the twins at the day care center if she wasn't back by noon, and to wear a hat and sunblock.

When Adam went down to the dock at eight, Fat Chance was already there. The tide had crested about seven, he said, but it was still high enough to catch a few now, and they could fill out the number later.

Catching crabs, Adam discovered to his dismay, involved tempting the crab up toward the sunlight with a raw chicken neck tied to a strong cord. He tried to ignore the smell and feel of chicken on his fingers, the guck on the crabs, the flies buzzing around the chicken necks warming in the sun. He concentrated instead on more abstract aspects of the process, and talked of the luring of crabs into Fat Chance's long-handled net as a metaphor for the en-

ticing of dishonest officials from the dark and murky depths of corruption into the net of the law and light of justice, using the criminal's own greed and love of things of this world to draw him out.

"Yeah," said Fat Chance. "Crabscam."

And he laughed his burbly laugh, a sound to which Adam preferred the scratching of fingernails across a chalkboard.

But Adam found himself laughing, too. He was sore and sunburned, on a shaky dock in the hot coastal sun amid gnats and mosquitoes and the smells of chicken necks and salt marsh mud, and he was with the man whose calling was to be the bane of his existence, the more than ample embodiment of all that Adam considered excessive and uncouth. Yet here they were laughing together.

And the more Adam laughed, the more Fat Chance laughed, standing there in his blue baseball cap and his orange sunglasses and his pink shirt, unbuttoned, and his black, wet-look trunks, what there was of them, leaning bare-bellied against the rail, cigar jammed into his jaw, right hand wrapped around a beer, foot resting on a closed but undoubtedly full cooler. He was, Adam thought, shameless, almost admirable, standing in a sort of heroic de-

fiance of flat tummies everywhere.

They laughed for a long time.

"Listen," Adam said finally, "maybe you'll think I'm crazy . . ."

"What maybe?"

" . . . but what if that thing we saw falling from that airplane contained some kind of drugs?"

Fat Chance pulled at his cigar and looked at Adam sideways. "Drugs?"

Adam wished he had said nothing. "You know, drugs, like in smuggling and all that. Marijuana."

"Good Lordy, Adam, where do you get this stuff?"

"Well, doesn't smuggling happen along the coast? I just thought what if that's what we saw, that's all."

"You mean you thought they threw drugs out of planes?"

"Look, forget I said anything."

"Ditched 'em, you mean? So they wouldn't get caught?"

Adam sighed. "I thought perhaps delivering. It was just an idea. It's isolated back here. There was a boat with a light and then the car lights, remember? I thought the boat could have picked it up and the car signalled all clear or land here or something."

"You can tell you're a bookworm there, Adam," said Fat

Chance. "Too much imagination." But Adam saw his eyes narrow as he thought about it.

"And the night before last, Ginger and I saw the fireworks, and then I heard a plane and a boat and there were car lights on shore."

Fat Chance sucked at his cigar then shook his head. "Coincidence. Landing strip up the island for condo owners. Lots of air traffic. And you expect boats in the water."

"Wouldn't that provide a good, uh, cover? I mean, if planes go over often, who would notice if one dropped a small package of marijuana?"

Fat Chance said nothing.

"Well, anyway," said Adam, "Ginger said something about bootleggers and pirates. Maybe I dreamed all of this."

"Not marijuana," said Fat Chance, pacing and poking the air with his cigar. "There's no money in that little bit. But cocaine, now, that's a different story, isn't it? There could have been a half a million bucks in a package that size."

"Half a million?"

Fat Chance flicked his cigar over the rail. "Maybe more."

Fat Chance got excited. He started talking about catching smugglers.

"We don't even know there *are* smugglers," said

Adam, lugging the bucket of marsh water and crabs up the steps to shore. "Maybe it *was* trash."

"Well, we'll just have to stake the scene out, won't we?"

Adam stopped and put the bucket down. "What do you mean by that?"

"I mean we'll be down on the dock again tonight, all casual-like, and see if the same thing happens."

"Then what?"

"Then we do our civic duty and call the cops and collect a reward."

"Reward?"

"I need a map of the island."

"What reward?"

"They always have a reward."

"Who does?"

"They do, Adam. Now come on."

Adam found Ginger's map and they spread it on the picnic table inside the cabin. The more they looked, the more excited Fat Chance got. He pointed out the long straight stretch of Big Turtle Creek running perpendicular to the island. "Great target," said Fat Chance. "He just flies right over that bit there and plunks down his package and the boat picks it up. Little mom and pop operation here, no major score, no major bust. Cosy."

"What if it hits in the mud

or something?" asked Adam.

Fat Chance pointed out that the drop had been made at high tide, when all the mud flats and humps were submerged, and that the boat was probably wide and flat-bottomed so that if the package was off target, the boat could skim over the marsh grasses and shallows and retrieve it. "So what they need is high tide when it's just getting dark. Which means they could do it again tonight." He looked at his watch. "Lordy, it's a long time away. What say we go surveil the island?"

"We what?"

"Surveil, surveil, you know. Recon, check it out. Bring the map."

Ginger had left the car at the park office, and Adam wanted to pick it up so that he could drive, Fat Chance being a little looser behind the wheel than Adam was comfortable with. But Fat Chance wouldn't let Adam use Brunhilde. "A purple 1948 Studebaker is not exactly your un conspicuous car," he said.

"Maroon," said Adam.

They stopped at Fat Chance's beach house, waved hello at the group at the television, picked up the binoculars, and started around the island. The beach side was crowded, houses bunched, every square foot of

sand a piece of premium real estate. The back side was wooded and sparsely developed, the few houses almost a quarter mile apart and larger and less beachy looking. Each had a dock; some had slips dug into the island itself so that boats could be parked like cars in driveways.

Adam spotted his cabin in the trees across the marshes and saw that they must be close to the spot where the car lights had appeared, near a house more or less opposite the straight stretch of the Big Turtle. Fat Chance drove slowly. Adam started sinking down into his seat.

"Sit up," said Fat Chance. "Act natural." He started tapping his foot on the accelerator. The car lurched and jerked.

"What are you doing?" Adam said.

"Relax," said Fat Chance, pulling onto the shoulder across the road from the house.

"What are you *doing*?"

"We got car trouble. See if you can spot a flat-bottomed boat."

"We can't stop here," Adam said. His voice was frantic.

Fat Chance pulled on the parking brake. "We did," he said, popping the hood.

Adam got out and tried to look at the house without seeming to. Fat Chance raised the

hood and leaned over the engine. Adam saw him pull a wire loose.

"What do you see?" asked Fat Chance in a low voice.

"Nothing," said Adam. "Let's go."

"Adam, just relax and look around. Is there a boat?"

Adam turned toward the water, trying to look casual. He couldn't think what to do with his hands; he felt his arms hanging out from his side like a mannequin's; his smile was a rictus. "I see a boat," he said through his teeth.

"How big?"

"It's got a cabin on it."

"Look for a little boat, like a rowboat or something. Aluminum, probably."

"I don't see one," said Adam, turning stiffly back to the car and seeing to his horror a man coming across the yard toward them. Adrenaline hit him like a hammer. He kicked Fat Chance on the ankle. "Somebody's coming," he said.

Fat Chance rose slowly from beneath the hood, wiping his hands on his shirt, face reddening. "Don't kick me," he said without moving his lips.

The man was about thirty, high forehead, huge corn-cob pipe, wearing some kind of flotation vest. He reached the car and took his pipe out of his mouth. "Trouble?"

"We don't want any," said Adam before he knew it.

"But we always seem to get it, don't we?" said Fat Chance.

"Running real rough, almost choked down. And I just had the damn thing tuned up, too."

"Mind if I look?" said the man.

"I'd appreciate it," said Fat Chance.

When the man's head was under the hood, Fat Chance mouthed something at Adam which Adam finally translated as "Keep your trap shut."

"Got a loose spark plug wire," said the man after a minute or two.

"Where?" said Fat Chance, leaning in with him. "Well, I'll be damned. Think that's it? Let's try her out."

Fat Chance cranked the car and it roared to life. Adam stood like a statue, smiling.

"We sure are much obliged to you, Mr. . . ." Fat Chance left the sentence hanging; but the man didn't fill in his name.

"Glad to help," he said, raising his hand and heading back toward the house.

"Well, thanks again," called Fat Chance. The man kept walking.

They drove away in silence. At the first stop sign, they both had a mildly hysterical attack of laughter.

“Let me look now,” said Fat Chance.
“Just a second. I think I see something.”

They sat on the bank above the dock, under the shade of palms and oaks. The tide was out and the Big Turtle was a thin stream of its morning self, twisting through mud humps and high reeds.

“What do you see?” said Fat Chance.

“Just a second.”

A breeze rattled the palm fronds and swung the beards of Spanish moss in slow rhythms.

“They’re my binoculars, Adam.”

“Okay, okay, here.” He passed the binoculars to Fat Chance. “Look over there, way up in the slip next to the house. Is that your flat-bottomed boat?”

Fat Chance leaned forward an inch as if it would help him see better. “Yeah,” he said after a moment, “yeah, I think you’re right. Little Dougie MacArthur is one of our dopers.”

“Maybe. Okay, now raise the binoculars and look just to the right a few inches.”

“Inches? Inches here or there or what?”

“A few degrees, whatever. Look for the flagpole in the distance. Isn’t that almost right across from the fireworks house?”

Fat Chance thought it was. They debated the role of the fireworks, Fat Chance saying he thought they were coincidental, a convenient distraction used by the smugglers. Adam said he thought it was more than that, was a sign showing the way to the Big Turtle’s straight stretch, maybe was a signal that it was all clear. “Maybe different colored rockets mean different things. One color might mean ‘Dump it all into Davy Jones’ locker.’ Another . . .”

“‘Davy Jones’ Locker?’”

“Another color might mean ‘Come on in.’”

“Nah,” said Fat Chance. “Too complicated. Keep it simple.”

“It is simple. It is simply a matter of taking reasonable precautions. One wouldn’t want to drop one’s drugs on a boatload of tourists. One would arrange a signal.”

“Too many people,” said Fat Chance, and they continued the debate until they heard the sound of the ranger’s jeep. Adam suddenly felt an overwhelming desire to hide.

The jeep circled the cabin and pulled up beside them. Ranger Wardlaw’s daughters looked out through the foggy plastic windows in the back. Adam introduced Fat Chance. Wardlaw asked if they’d had any luck crabbing that morning, said

they'd probably do better at the change of the tide that afternoon. "Eat 'em while they're hot if you can," he added. "Do you steam or boil?"

"Boil," said Fat Chance, "with my own secret herbs and spices."

"Try steaming sometime. I think you'll like it. Oh, by the way, Mr. Clay, I stopped by to tell you that the day care closes for lunch and your two little girls are the last ones there. I would have picked them up myself, but I didn't know if anybody'd be here."

The guilt Adam felt at the sound of the jeep was nothing to that which smote him now. How could he have forgotten the twins? What would Ginger think? She would kill him; that's what, and he'd deserve it. Playing cops and robbers with Fat Chance. Of all the irresponsible, childish . . .

"You want I should drive you in?" asked Fat Chance.

"No," Adam snapped, but then he realized that his car was down at the office. Fat Chance would have to take him. "Yes," he sighed. Then his shoulders slumped in defeat. "Never mind," he said. In the distance, trailing a cloud of dust, Brunhilde was bouncing along the washboard road toward the cabin.

Adam didn't know what to say. He knew of no excuse for

his behavior, no defense. He stood awaiting Ginger's justified wrath.

"I'm sorry, Sis," said Fat Chance as Ginger let the twins out of the car. "My fault. We were just going to get them. We just flat lost track of time."

Adam saw that the phrasing was perfect—first an apology, then an acceptance of blame, then an indication that action had been about to be taken, and finally, and most effective, the "flat lost track of time," implying something out of their hands. To flat lose track of time was not the same as to neglect responsibility. It ranked somewhere between losing your car keys and losing a sock in the wash. Adam didn't like it. It made him feel that he was cheating somehow, and that Fat Chance had some sort of hold over him.

"I hope," said Ginger to Adam, "that you didn't forget your sunblock, too." Her tone made it clear that poetic justice would be served if he had forgotten it. He had.

"Sorry," he said, and smiled. Ginger raised the corners of her mouth.

And Fat Chance only made things worse a few minutes later when he whispered, "Don't tell her what we were doing." Adam hadn't planned to because he couldn't think of any

way to tell her without sounding silly. Now not telling her was connected with Fat Chance and keeping secrets from his own wife. His mouth tasted of old pennies.

That afternoon he went to the beach and played extra hard in the surf with the twins. Ginger kept him coated in sunblock.

“We’ll go back down about eight,” said Fat Chance, reaching into the sink for another crab. A column of steam roiled from the vast pot and spread in clouds across the ceiling. “That’ll give us plenty of time in case they come early.” As he talked he gestured with the crab, whose legs and claws waved vaguely in the air and whose stalky eyes swept the room like twin, uncoordinated radar. Fat Chance plopped it into the water. “Sure wish you had a lid for this thing,” he said. Another set of legs appeared over the rim of the pot. “Get back,” said Fat Chance, giving the crab a quick rap on the shell where its head would be if crabs had heads. “Feisty little boogers, aren’t they? Good sign.”

Adam wasn’t sure he could keep an appetite. He should have obeyed his Restaurant Rule: Never, under any circumstances, go into the kitchen.

But Adam found the crabs delicious. They ate them hot, with butter and lots of newspaper spread everywhere, using a nutcracker or a mallet on the claws. Fat Chance pried open the carapaces and scooped out the meat himself. “Wouldn’t want you biting down on the wrong stuff,” he said as he passed a plate of meat to Adam.

“One of these days, Marvyn,” said Ginger, reaching for another claw, “someone is going to learn you some manners.”

“I got manners already,” Fat Chance said.

“Mostly bad,” said Adam, and even Fat Chance laughed.

Around eight Adam and Fat Chance took the remains of the feast to the dock to consign them to the sea. “Salt water to salt water,” said Fat Chance as he shook the bits of shell and claw and leg into the creek. “Muck to muck.” They sat for a while, waiting and pretending to talk. Adam said he’d enjoyed the crab. Fat Chance promised they’d try for shrimp at low tide tomorrow. Adam couldn’t talk him out of it.

Finally the fireworks started, and they waited, and there was the sound of a plane.

“Let’s get off the dock,” said Adam, moving up the boardwalk. “We can watch from shore.”

They spotted the plane in the

gathering dusk, still lit by the sun above the shadowed landscape. Fat Chance estimated its altitude to be no more than five hundred feet. It was flying over the straight stretch. Fat Chance tried his binoculars. "It's too dim," he said. "I can't . . . There it is."

Adam could see something small falling, spinning in the faint light. The bank was higher than the dock, and from the new angle he saw the splash where the object hit the creek.

"Watch for the boat," said Fat Chance.

But there was no boat. The minutes dragged on, and still there was nothing on the water. Ten minutes passed, then twenty.

"We are," said Fat Chance, "a pair of idiots. Spying on a litter bug. We dump our garbage in the creek, he dumps his. A real federal case here, Adam."

"I never said . . ."

"You said there was a pattern. You said fireworks, plane, boat, car lights. You said smugglers."

"I said 'what if.' I was speculating. Is it a crime to speculate?"

"It should be. In your case, it should be."

"Maybe you scared them off with your transparently absurd car trouble."

"Yeah? Well, who said, 'We

don't want any?' Real subtle, professor, real natural like. 'Trouble?' 'We don't want any.' You really wasted my vacation time, you know that?"

"I wasted? You . . ."

Across the marsh a pair of car lights came on and lit twin trails across the water. In those trails they saw the silhouette of a boat with two men.

"Bingo," said Fat Chance. "Bingo, bingo, bingo."

Ranger Wardlaw's office was barely big enough for the three of them, and they had practically to shout over the rattling air conditioner. Adam felt that the ranger wasn't reacting to their ideas with enthusiasm.

"And you saw this last night and the night before?" Wardlaw asked.

"And the night before that," said Adam. "Or some of it."

Wardlaw shook his head. "What does your wife think?"

"I haven't told her."

Wardlaw turned to Fat Chance. "How about your buddies?"

"Are you kidding?" said Fat Chance. "I'll tell them when it's nailed down. You don't know those guys. They'd try to take all the credit."

"Yeah, well, it's probably best you haven't told anybody, what with everybody so ready to

sue over nothing these days."

"Sue?" said Fat Chance. "Sue who? The smugglers gonna sue me?"

"No, but the pilot of that plane might. Twin engine plane, you said, comes in low a little after sunset? Could it have some blue on it maybe?"

Adam shrugged. "It was pretty dark."

"I think it's old Gramps Lindsay. Cleveland P. Lindsay. Maybe you heard of him?"

"What is he, rich or what?" said Fat Chance.

"He owns most of the back side of the island where it butts up against the state park. All that marsh is state park. All of the island you can see is his."

"So why isn't he developing it? What's his source of income?" Fat Chance's tone was harsh, and Adam saw Wardlaw's jaw clench before he answered.

"Income's his source of income," said Wardlaw.

"That ain't his trash he's dumping, you know."

"He can buy and sell you and me, buddy. What would he need to smuggle for?"

"Them as has," said Fat Chance, "wants more."

Wardlaw started to say something, but held it in check. Adam had the impression that they had just crossed the line from concerned crackpots to ar-

rogant outsiders, and he was suddenly embarrassed for Fat Chance, for Wardlaw, for himself. How else could he expect Wardlaw to react—if smugglers really were operating right under his nose, Wardlaw stood to lose his job. Maybe they shouldn't have come at all.

"What should we do now, Mr. Wardlaw?" asked Adam.

"Nothing. I'll see what's up. Thanks for coming to me, Mr. Clay. I'm sure this is just some misunderstanding or something like that."

"Not to change the subject," said Adam precisely to change the subject, "but how is the shrimping off the dock?"

Wardlaw was apparently just as glad to change the subject and told Adam that shrimping was good because the creek had a good flow between tides. He made suggestions about catching and cooking, and Adam thanked him, and they left.

Fat Chance wasn't satisfied, though mercifully he waited until they were outside to say so. "I think we should go to a real cop."

"He said he'd handle it, Marvin. Just let him do his job."

"His job is watching trees and turtles. We need a cop."

"We did what we were supposed to do. It's out of our hands. Now let's just go shrimping and get it over with."

Which was not exactly what he meant to say.

Adam stood on the dock and sweated. It was about all he could do. The tide was low and the sun was high and it was hot. Acres of mud lay cracking in the heat, and the dying breath of a breeze brought only the odor of salt and fishy decay. Mosquitoes buzzed in squadrons; horseflies attacked at will. Fat Chance stood with one foot planted on the cooler. He had not offered Adam a beer.

Fat Chance hauled up one of the shrimp traps. It was empty again. " 'Good shrimpin' in the Turtle 'cause it's got a good flow,' " he whined in poor mimicry of Wardlaw. "Not enough he's not a cop. He's even a stinko ranger."

Fat Chance was in one of his moods.

Ginger had suggested they eat shrimp in a restaurant. "I said I'd catch you a shrimp dinner," Fat Chance had said, "and I will. Now are you coming with me, Dr. Adameus Clay, or are you going to wimp out down on bikini beach?"

Adam still wasn't sure why he had come. In his mind he saw white linen napkins, and pink and white shrimp encircling a bowl of bright red sauce, and moisture beading on a tall glass of tea with a yellow lemon

slice on the rim and a green sprig of mint floating with the ice.

Fat Chance pulled up another cage. "Well, that's better," he grumbled. Adam saw a half a dozen shrimp in the trap. "Not much better, but some. Kinda small, though."

"Would you please quit complaining about everything?"

"Who's complaining? I'm commenting. Those are facts. They're kinda small."

"That's a complaint."

"Well, excuse me all to hell, professor." He shook the trap and held it up again. "My Lordy, just look at those monster shrimp. How did they ever get so big, do you suppose?"

He dropped the trap back into the water just as a small boat appeared around a mud bank. The man in front was about Adam's age. The man in the back was thirty years younger and had a high forehead and a corn cob pipe.

"Marvyn," Adam said low, in warning.

"Be easy here," said Fat Chance, pulling up another trap. "We're just two guys fishing, they're just two guys fishing. If you think you're gonna say something stupid again, don't say anything."

They ignored the boat as it drew closer and started around the bend on which the dock sat.

The passengers raised their hands in a noncommittal greeting. Adam and Fat Chance raised theirs back.

"Well, howdy there," came a voice from the back of the boat. "How's the car trouble?"

Fat Chance leaned forward and squinted and pretended to recognize the man with the pipe. "Oh, howdy yourself. Car's fine, thanks. Appreciate your help."

The man raised his palm and shook his head, refusing the thanks. "Shrimpin'?" he called.

"Tryin'," yelled Fat Chance, holding up the trap.

"Any luck?"

"Lots of luck. Not much of it good."

The boat was slowing now and turning toward the dock. Adam leaned over the rail next to Fat Chance, smiling. "Make them go away," he muttered.

"Now just how the hell do I do that?"

The boat pulled alongside and the man in front threw up a rope. Fat Chance caught it and stood holding it.

"Just make it fast on that rail," said the older man. His hair started about halfway back on his head and was wiry and combed straight back so that it looked like a little cap of fur.

Fat Chance gave Adam a shrug and tied the rope.

"Just wanted to see your

catch," said the younger man, tying the stern rope to a corner post. The dock floor was almost four feet above the surface of the creek and the crossbracings were exposed, making a big X on each side. The younger man used the bracing to climb up on the dock. Fat Chance gave him a hand over the rail.

"Thanks," said the man. He knocked out his pipe, then held his hand out to Fat Chance. "Stewart Aycock," he said, smiling.

Fat Chance shook his hand. "Marvyn Smith," he said.

"Marv," said Aycock. Adam began to relax. Aycock turned to him. "Stewart Aycock," he said again, holding out his hand.

"Adam Jones," said Adam, shaking his hand.

"Good to meet you, Adam," he said. "Now what we'd like is for you boys to go fishing with us for a while." His smile widened.

"Well, I thank you," said Fat Chance, "but I don't really believe we could."

"Please," said the man in the boat. Adam looked over the rail. The man was holding a double-barrelled shotgun. "Pretty please."

"You first, Pops," said Aycock.

"Now listen . . ." Adam began.

"Shut up or we'll have a hunt-

ing accident right here," said the older man. "Now get in this boat."

Adam felt numb. He started over the rail slowly. He knew it would be a one way ride. At low tide the boat would be hidden by mud humps and marsh grass and they could be drowned out of sight in the creek somewhere and their bodies might even make it out to sea before they were found and Ginger and the twins would be alone.

"Come on, old man," said the younger one from above him. He was on the crossbrace now, moving mechanically, trying to think. He felt the warm splinters of wood under his fingers, heard the water lapping at the boat, smelled the sea. Nothing came. Then he was in the boat and sitting on the center bench.

"Okay, fatso," said the younger voice, "over."

There were a few seconds of silence. "Come on, big boy," said the man in the boat, raising the shotgun. "Get in."

Adam looked up. Fat Chance was sitting on the rail, his leg stretched, toe pointed, trying to find the dock floor outside the rail. He reached it and eased down and stood there, holding tight to the rail behind him. The younger man climbed down on the bracing below and held out a hand. "Let's go," he said, his voice impatient.

"I don't swim so good," said Fat Chance.

"Now what a shame."

Adam felt a welling terror. He could see Fat Chance above him, blank-eyed and quivering. They both knew that if the boat left the dock, they'd never come back.

"It's not deep right at the dock, Marvyn," he heard himself saying. "Even if you fell in, you could probably stand up."

Fat Chance stood frozen and blinking.

"And whatever you do," said Adam slowly, tightening his grip on the seat, "don't jump."

Fat Chance stood immobile for a second or two more before a smile of comprehension spread across his face, and he stepped right off the dock and dropped straight down on the boat's rear bench. The boat lurched mightily, and Adam saw the older man pitching right at him, gun first, and he put out his hands to ward off the gun, felt his fingers close on the barrel, felt his arms and body twist for balance and to deflect the muzzle, and he found the older man flipping into the water. Then he saw Fat Chance in the water, too, and Aycock, and he looked down and found he was holding the shotgun in his own hands. Backwards.

He turned it around and planted the stock in his shoul-

der. "Hold it," he yelled. They all froze as best they could in waist-high water.

"Yahoo," yelled Fat Chance. He splashed water into Aycock's face.

Adam couldn't believe it. He had them. He had them cold, just like in the movies.

Then the older man started wading toward the boat.

"You hold it," said Adam, swinging the muzzle his way.

The man grinned and kept wading. "You don't have what it takes," he said as he came closer to the boat. "I can see it in your eyes."

"Shoot him, Adam," yelled Fat Chance. "You got to shoot him."

"He can't," said the man. "It goes against everything he knows. Get the fat one, Stewart."

"You stop," said Adam, "or I'll blow your head off."

"You'll have to blow my head off," said the man, looking right in Adam's eyes, "because that's the only way I'll stop."

Adam lowered his head and sighted down the barrel at the grinning face and willed his finger to squeeze, knew he had to, no other way, knew he couldn't, couldn't possibly, but he had to, and he raised the gun again to shoot and closed his eyes so he couldn't see and told his finger to move and it wouldn't, and he

knew that he never could and that he was a dead man. And then the gun was flying up out of his hands somehow.

He looked up. Ranger Wardlaw leaned out from the dock holding the shotgun.

"Thank God you're here," said Adam. He didn't have to choose to kill or die; the awful burden was gone. "Oh, thank God."

"What a sap," said Aycock.

"Thanks, Burris," said the older man. "Help us get the fat one in the boat."

"I thought you were just going to scare them, Mr. Lindsay," said Wardlaw.

"Scaring might not be enough. This way is better."

Then Adam understood. What a sap indeed, he thought. Of course Wardlaw was in on it. How else could they drop their contraband right into his back yard?

"I'm not sure we should do this, Mr. Lindsay," said Wardlaw.

Lindsay heaved himself up into the boat. "Do?" he said. "You don't have to *do* anything, Burris. All you have to do is look the other way, like always."

Wardlaw held the gun tucked loosely in his armpit. "I don't think I can do that this time," he said.

"You got no choice, Wardlaw," Lindsay snapped. "You're going

to blow the whistle on us? On yourself, too, then. Your little girls already had a momma walk out on them with a bum. What's going to happen to them when their daddy gets sent up for smuggling dope? You think about them, Wardlaw."

Wardlaw was silent. Fat Chance and Aycock stood in the river, Adam sat on his seat. The boat bumped against the dock with hollow thunks.

"Look," said Lindsay, "I don't like this, either. But I got too much to lose, and you got too much to lose. It's got to be this way."

Wardlaw was motionless, a dark shape above Adam against the blue-white of the midday sky.

"You make a mistake here," said Lindsay quietly, "and there is no turning back. Not ever."

Wardlaw stirred, wiped his mouth with his forearm, looked down. "I guess you're right about that, Mr. Lindsay," he said, and swung himself up on the dock.

"Good man," said Lindsay.

"Into the boat, fatso," said Aycock.

Adam felt his heart go cold. This was it.

"So if you all will just climb up here," said Wardlaw, "I'd be most appreciative."

"We'll do it my way," said Lindsay.

"You're not going to do it at

all," said Wardlaw. "You were right, Mr. Lindsay. Can't make a mistake here. If I put out with you on this one, I'm taking the wrong tide and it won't take me back. I can't take that tide. All this is through."

"You're a stupid man, Burris," said Lindsay, "and like I told Pops here, if you want to stop me, you're going to have to blow my head off."

"You know I won't do that," said Wardlaw. "But I will blow a hole in your boat." And he leaned way over the rail and tightened his grip on the stock and pointed the muzzle toward the bottom of the boat. "Jump out, please, Mr. Clay," he said. Adam jumped. There was a loud explosion and the boat started sinking into the Big Turtle, taking Cleveland P. Lindsay down with it.

The sheriff listened to the story open-mouthed while four of the five people in front of his desk dripped salt water on his carpet.

Aycock and Lindsay found themselves in jail charged with conspiracy to commit murder. After Wardlaw gave a statement about the drug drops, smuggling charges were added and three more people were arrested. Wardlaw turned himself in on smuggling charges, too, and sat in a cell next to the

one, occupied by Aycock and Lindsay while the sheriff made hurried phone calls to get bail set. The sheriff hadn't wanted to lock him up at all, but Wardlaw had insisted that they go by the book.

The sheriff thanked Adam and Fat Chance for doing their civic duty. There was no mention of a reward.

Adam caught a cold from standing in the sheriff's air-conditioned office in wet clothes.

Ginger was not as shocked as Adam thought she might be. "I knew it was trouble when Marvyn walked in. I swear, Adameus Clay, when you and my brother get together . . ." She threw up her hands and left the thought unfinished.

The sheriff told Adam and Fat Chance the next day that they would be needed for the trial in a few months and that it was important for Wardlaw's sake that they both testify. Fat Chance asked if the sheriff couldn't restrict them to the island until the trial or something. Adam was relieved to hear the sheriff say that he had no power to keep them there.

Wardlaw stopped by to apologize for all the trouble and to thank Adam for helping him. "If this hadn't happened, there's no telling how deep I would have gotten in. As it is, my lawyer thinks I've got a pretty good chance of coming out okay." He told Adam he was sorry about his cold and hoped he had had a good vacation in spite of everything.

"It was . . . different," said Adam, "which is what Ginger said it would be."

On Fat Chance's last night on the island, Ginger took them out to eat shrimp. Fat Chance behaved reasonably well, complaining to the waiter only twice and threatening to leave no tip only once.

Adam spent most of the rest of their vacation bundled on the screened porch with hot tea and a box of tissues, reading and sneezing and looking at the Big Turtle.

When he nodded off, his dreams were of giant pots and clouds of steam and Fat Chance bopping wriggling crabs with an enormous wooden spoon. He called them nightmares.

UNSOLVED

by C. R. Wylie, Jr.

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the July issue.

Long ago, in a forgotten country of the east there existed a remarkable oracle. Unlike most oracles it was not the mouthpiece of a single deity but of three, the God of Truth, the God of Falsehood, and the God of Diplomacy. These gods were represented by three identical figures seated in a row behind the altar at which their petitioners knelt. The gods were always ready to answer their mortal supplicants, but since their identities were impossible to determine because their images were exactly alike, no one ever knew whether the reply to his question came from the God of Truth and hence could be relied on, or whether it came from the God of Falsehood and so was certainly untrue, or whether it came from the God of Diplomacy and hence might be either true or false. This confusion, of course, did not deter the multitudes from seeking advice, though it did create a very profitable sideline for the priests of the temple who, for a price, were always ready to interpret the utterances of the oracle.

One day a sacrilegious fool came to the altar vowing to do what the wisest men of the past had failed to accomplish, namely to expose the identity of each god.

Said he to the figure on the left, "Who sittest next to thee?"

"The God of Truth," was the answer.

Then said the fool to the image in the center, "Who art thou?"

"The God of Diplomacy," was the answer.

Lastly to the image on the right the fool said, "Who sittest next to thee?"

"The God of Falsehood," came the reply.

"Oho," said the fool to himself, "so that's the way of it."

And straightway he established an interpreting concession just outside the temple and soon had driven the priests out of business through the uncanny accuracy of his interpretations.

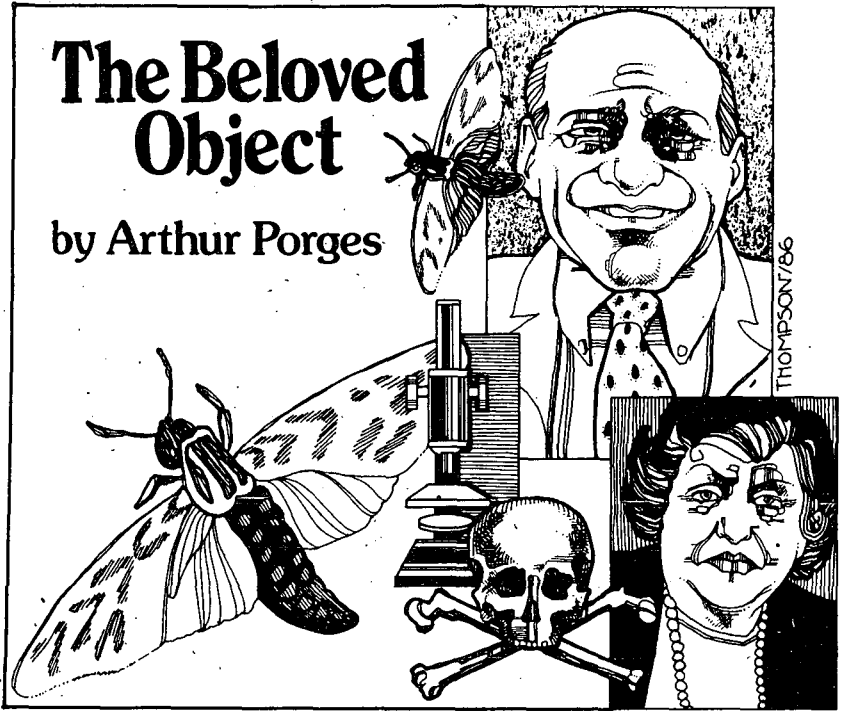
Can you also determine the identity of each god from the answers they made to the three simple questions they were asked?

See page 108 for the solution to the May puzzle.

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The Beloved Object

by Arthur Porges



For almost a year Professor Burnham and his young assistant had spent every Friday evening in the biology laboratory of the small college, dissecting, extracting, concentrating, and keeping the meticulous records characteristic of all competent scientists. Thousands of female moths, bred for the purpose, had perished in order to provide the two researchers with a few grams of pale liquid. The extract was almost colorless and had no odor, but only to human senses. To a male moth the pale, oily stuff was a promise of insect para-

dise, a powerful and subtle aphrodisiac.

As for the professor, after stagnating for over a decade, he was suddenly the keen entomologist who had earned a Ph.D. at twenty-three. Now almost completely bald, with the thickened waistline of late middle age, he had recently acquired an almost boyish air; his stodginess had diminished strikingly. No doubt this was due to Susan, so fresh and lovely, who now shared his triumph. For the few drops had been analyzed, and a much more potent equivalent synthesized; to-

gether they had built the huge and complex molecule, a highly sophisticated operation, over which they had every right to exult. It was, in fact, the sort of job that might tax one of the big pharmaceutical firms, with its dozens of expert biochemists. An impartial observer might have inferred that they had been remarkably lucky, certainly the case, but as Pasteur rightly noted, chance favors the prepared mind.

It was just as well, however, that the work would be finished tonight, for Mrs. Burnham, always a problem, had been increasingly difficult lately. Even though Friday was her bridge night, she resented his staying at the college after classes. Didn't the old fool know he was through as a scientist? A mere assistant professor at a hick school, built mainly for thick-headed Aggies, he was obviously not going anyplace, not at fifty-eight. Why, then, this sudden interest in laboratory work? If Myron weren't such a dull, epicene loser, she might expect there was something going on between him and that girl student—Susan somebody. But certainly no attractive girl of twenty-three was going to involve herself with a pot-bellied, sexless, boring man of fifty-eight; and it was equally unlikely that Myron would be capable of making a pass at her.

Still, when a man reached a certain age, you had better watch him; it wouldn't do any harm to check . . .

Mrs. Burnham threw a light wrap over her shoulders, although the night was almost oppressively warm, made her excuses, and left the bridge game early. Just once she ought to see with her own eyes what Myron was up to, and just how pretty the assistant was; at home, she never got much sense out of the old fool. Was his vagueness actually an attempt to conceal something? Certainly he always seemed reluctant to discuss the girl. "Just a student," he'd say casually, changing the subject. "I don't really know much about her. I'm in charge of her thesis, and if it's good, I may put in a word at State, when she starts her graduate work. They still remember me there," he'd added, with a pathetic squaring of his narrow shoulders.

It was a pleasant walk to the college over open country, with midsummer stars burning above, the needle-sharp chirping of crickets, and the heady scent of night-blooming jasmine. But she was barely conscious of these attractions, preferring the excitement and color of a crowded room, with dancing and plenty of liquor. If there were husky young men to eye her figure, which was

still good, so much the better.

"Susan," Burnham said, wiping his hands, "I think we're ready for the capstone. The chemistry is right, as nearly as I can tell, but one difference in the bonding may ruin the effect, biologically, as you know."

"I can hardly wait," she sang, her sharp, almost feline face—he privately thought of it as her pussycat look—glowing. She stood next to him, so close he could sense the warmth of her body, and catch the scent of some delicate perfume, and a wave of despair swept over him. They were meeting at the wrong point in time. He was old, too old, too married, too late. A line of Tennyson came to mind: "Time, a maniac scattering dust; Life, a Fury slinging flame." Damn a world that didn't make more sense. When a man had the perception, the maturity, the taste to know what was uniquely right for him, it was invariably too late for action. This particular idyll would end soon; maybe even tonight. No more of those wonderful sessions of work and happy camaraderie, where age was no barrier; all that mattered was intelligence, the search for truth, the perfect match of two temperaments and spirits. The intellectual delight of their progress had been infused with the warmth and sensuousness of her femininity. He recalled

the coffee breaks, with the dark, fragrant brew made in Erlenmeyer flasks over a Bunsen burner, while he told her whimsical anecdotes about his own college days abroad. All very innocent on the surface, at least on her part; she was a naive young woman from a small town, unaware, he was sure, of the emotions that clawed him: the desire to touch her glowing skin, to kiss that pouting underlip . . .

But Susan was graduating; it was now a matter of days, and she would soon be off to State for advanced work in biology. How could he stand it without her? To have only dull clods about him, faculty and students; to have no escape from his wife, that intolerable woman of the brittle, cosmetic mask instead of a real face. She loved to have young men look at her, but was far too cold and cautious to step one inch off the path of marital rectitude. Thinking about all this, Burnham's mood was like a dark tower full of armed men.

"Mr. Burnham—Professor—Herr Doktor!" Susan was smiling at him, and he snapped back to present reality.

"Sorry; I was woolgathering. We'll try our luck right now."

"Not luck—skill, yours mostly." She said it with obvious sincerity, and he felt himself flushing with pleasure. Yes,

he had worked with a sureness and expertise that had eluded him for years.

"I couldn't have done it without you," he said, adding silently, "as a scientist and beloved companion." Then aloud: "You have the gift, no doubt of that; they'll spot it at State."

He took a disc of filter paper and with a pipette placed a small drop of extract in the center; then he put the white circle on the sill of an open window. Susan, quick-minded as ever, noting the slight breeze, put a glass rod across one side to hold it down.

"Will they really come?" she asked. "So tiny an amount—and so many square miles of land out there." She suddenly seemed to him terribly, vulnerably young at that moment, and he thought, with a twinge of guilt, that a more sophisticated girl, with parents instead of a doddering old aunt to look after her, would not have been drawn into working nights alone with an older man. But thank God she had; these weeks had been like cool water to a wanderer dying of thirst on a desert.

"They'll come," he assured her, with a confidence that was only partly assumed. Once he'd been up there with the best of them in entomology, sustained, too, by a real flair for biochemistry, and this bit of research

had been done with power and competence. "To them it's like a fire-bell in the night, or a flaming beacon, or maybe an explosion in a perfume factory. It's as if each male moth heard the —ah—Bo Derek of the species calling him, and personally." As soon as he said this, Burnham felt foolish. He had no business using names; not when he didn't really know which ones applied today; hell, he was still back with the young Liz Taylor—there was a beauty!

"It's incredible how few molecules of the compound a male moth can detect and respond to. This tiny bit should bring several dozen, and in a hurry."

"You wouldn't think there'd be that many around, even," she marveled.

"Oh, we may not see them, but no doubt there are thousands within a mile or two of here. Look! One already!"

A big white moth, ghostlike in its fragility, was fluttering about the filter paper in a paroxysm of desire. It was joined immediately by a second, and in a few moments, at least fifteen were flying around in a pale nebula.

"We've done it!" Susan cried, her violet eyes shining. Then she flung her arms about Burnham and kissed him. He knew it meant nothing; her lips were cool, unopened, dry, without even a hint of passion. He was

just a father figure, somebody to fill in for her lost parents, and that was all. But for a heartbeat he fought an almost overwhelming urge to take her in his arms. Then the brief struggle was lost, and he reached out hungrily.

"Myron!" The harsh cry made him flinch before Susan realized his intent. His wife stood at the door, her face crimson under its heavy makeup, her thin mouth tightened to a bloodless line of fury. "So this is how you do research! Moths, is it? And I suppose this little tramp is the flame!"

"Vera," Burnham said, begging her with his voice. She must not soil all this, smear it with her own dirtiness. "You don't understand; it's nothing like that. We just finished a really wonderful experiment, and got a bit emotional for a minute."

"Like hell you finished an experiment," Vera raged, her voice shaking. "Not quite; you were just starting one. As for you, you floozie, don't think I didn't see you kiss him, and him old enough to be your grandfather." A stream of filthy invectives followed, words that Burnham had heard her use before only when very drunk. Their effect on Susan was devastating. They seemed to shrivel her as a killing wind shrivels young corn. Before he could

think of anything to say, she ran past him, sobbing, and out of the laboratory. He knew then that she would never come back—never. Numbly, hearing almost nothing of his wife's tirade, he followed her home.

The next week was a bad one for Burnham. His own guilt feelings hit him hard, and Vera was quite merciless. Nothing could persuade her that Susan's kiss was their first, and innocent. On a dozen different occasions she told him what a lecherous old fool he was.

"Just look at yourself in the mirror, for God's sake! Bald as an egg, figure like an avocado, and no more sex appeal than a trout. And you have the gall to make a pass at a teenager. All she wants is to pick your brains—such as they are—and get a good recommendation to Dr. Graves at State. If she knew how little they care about you there, she'd never have bothered."

"I tell you," he insisted daily, "that there was nothing serious between us. I never touched the girl until that night. She's just a nice, sweet, small-town kid."

Implacable, she had jeered: "Save your breath—which isn't too good, by the way. That was no childish kiss she gave you, right smack on the mouth. In another second you'd have

grabbed her; I could tell. The expression on your face," she continued relentlessly, "damned if I didn't think of a cat on its litter box." Her bitter, raucous laughter followed him out of the room.

By the end of the week, he was longing for Friday. Then, at least, she would go away for a few hours. He stayed at school as late as he dared, coming home to a cold meal while Vera was dressing for the bridge club. The shower was running full blast, roaring and gurgling, and on their bed lay the gown, too young for her in its frilliness, that she meant to wear. It was blue, but so pale as to seem white. It reminded him of the moths' wings—and then, inevitably, Susan. Not a word from her—nothing. She must have left the campus immediately after the incident; even her friends seemed to have no idea of her plans. No doubt she had returned to her home town, eighty miles from the college. She would not ask for that letter of recommendation now, that was certain. She would want only to forget the whole sordid business. It wasn't his fault, but Susan wouldn't care about that; he was linked to her humiliation, and she had fled like an injured animal. Because of Vera. How he loathed that woman! It seemed incredible now that he ever could have wanted her.

Somehow, young fool that he'd been, he had missed that pursy mouth, the too-small eyes. All he'd been able to notice was her taut, exciting body; what a silly thing to base a marriage on.

His brooding gaze returned to the blue dress. Take off the fussy trimmings, and it was much like a shroud lying there. A pleasant thought: a shroud for Vera . . .

"You'll stay home, I suppose," she said, half contemptuously, as she drank a martini. "Or do you have another pretty coed lined up for a bit of lab work? Next time stick to the love life of your idiotic moths, instead of a pupil, because if you don't—" She didn't bother to complete the threat; there was no fight left in Myron now; never had been much. She wondered, not for the first time, why she'd married this spineless mediocrity. Jack Bragin had his own auto agency and was worth a fortune. That same body that had falsely promised Burnham so much could have as easily lured Bragin. It must have been her absurd notion about the advantages of being a faculty wife. If Myron had continued as he began, and was now at Harvard or Princeton, that might be different; but at this jerkwater college . . . yes, she'd blown it, all right.

It was a lovely evening, and most people would have rel-

ished a walk through the fragrant countryside. A light, variable breeze was blowing, first from one direction, then another. It carried a variety of summer odors, like colored threads, in its fabric.

But Vera was impatient, vaguely discontented, and walked quickly, oblivious of much around her. Pity the car was laid up for repairs; she'd have made Myron drive her otherwise. She could have called a cab, but you had to wait so long, with only two of them working at night, that it hardly paid; she could get there faster on foot.

Something small and white fluttered about her face, and she brushed it away with a grimace. Ironical, her marrying a bugologist, when she hated all kinds, the creepy things. Even butterflies, that so many people liked. They had soft, palpitant bodies, snaky and queer; ugh! Two more moths tickled her cheek, then several others, and suddenly there was quite a cloud of them. It was strange, unusual, and a little scary. She waved them off, or tried to, swearing angrily. What's with these crazy insects? she thought, swinging her arms vigorously, battering at the swarm. She began to walk faster, almost jogging. It seemed to be snowing now, but this was summer, damn it. Then it was more than

merely a nuisance; another great cloud of moths closed in on her. She killed hundreds with her flailing hands, red nails thrashing amid white wings; others spun erratically to the grass on broken sails. But there was no end to the relentless gathering. They clustered thickly about her face, on her shoulders and dress, and her mouth, when she opened it to scream, became clogged with the enraptured males, seeking paradise within. Vera fell to the ground, rolling about wildly, fighting for breath, coughing, wheezing, gagging, completely hidden, finally, by a huge mound of swirling white. For a few minutes the pale mass heaved with internal convulsions, then its core, at least, was still, while from miles around the eager insects hurried to merge with the boiling, eight-foot sphere of orgasmic delight.

For smeared over Vera's dress was the concentrated essence of moth femaleness, applied by Burnham while his wife showered. And her martini itself had a dozen drops of the potent extract in it. There was nothing the human nose or palate could detect, but Vera's clothes, and her breath, promised each male moth every ultimate reward of midsummer love.

And so they came, in their thousands, to the Beloved Object. . . .

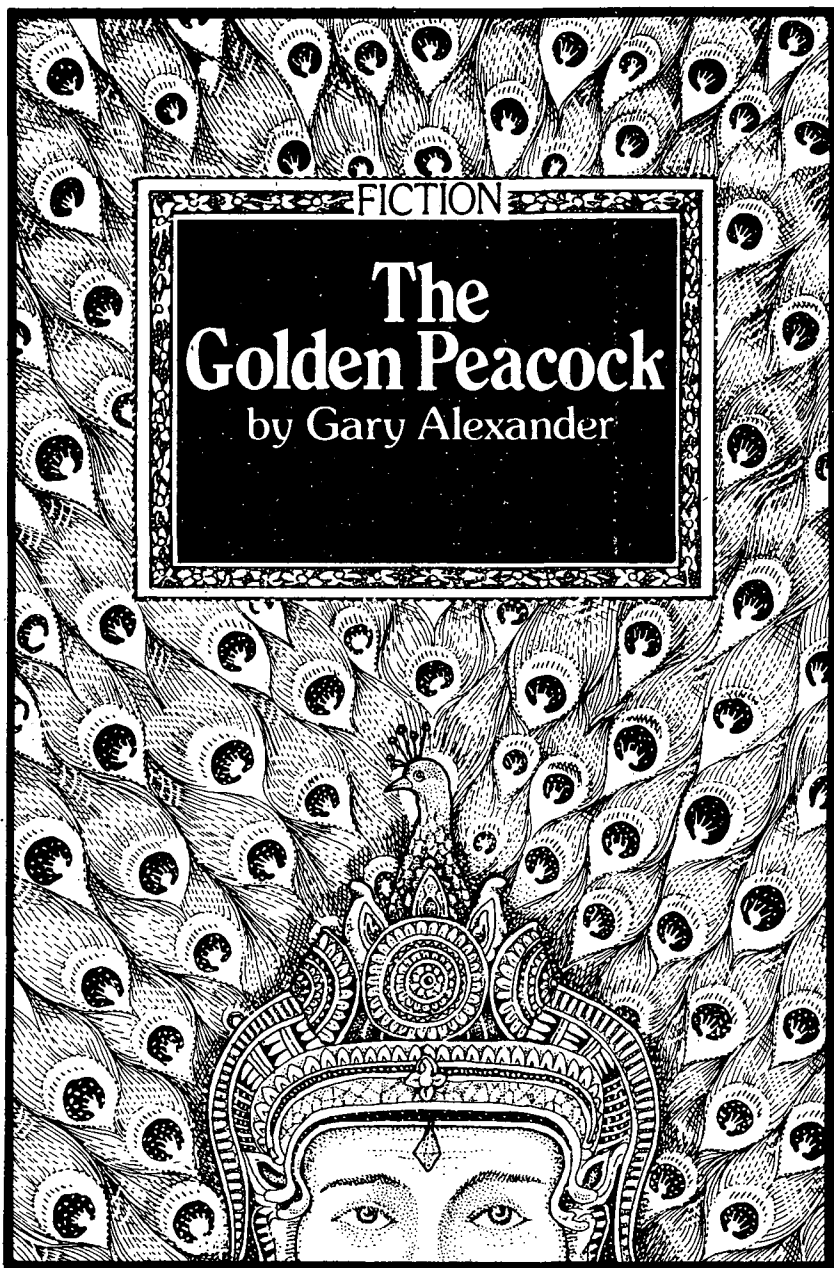


Illustration by Glenn Wolff

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The Kingdom of Luong is a fancy, a figment.

It is not a remote Southeast Asian backwater surrounded by China, Burma, Laos, and Thailand.

It is not sometimes known as the Fourth Indochina; nor was it granted independence from France in the 1950's. The ability to feed itself and a pervasive political apathy did not spare it a war of national liberation.

Nor does it have but one city of note, the capital of Hickorn, a sleepy metropolis of one hundred fifty thousand located in the lush lowlands on the Ma San River, a town whose primary charm is a nostalgic colonial decay.

Nor is it ruled by seventy-five-year-old Prince Novisad Pakse, a neutralist who straddles the fence by the simple act of naming and renaming Hickorn's streets in honor of powerful foreign leaders. Nor is this a man whose abiding passion is pocket billiards.

Nor is it attempting of late to attract hard currency through tourism, the Luongan zin being ignored on international money markets, let alone traded.

Nor is Hickorn Superintendent of Police Bamsan Kiet suffering a dyspepsia attack upon learning that a national treasure—no, *the* national treasure—has been stolen.

But if the above were true—

Kiet had just walked into his office one morning when he was accosted by a near-hysterical Captain Binh, an earnest young man who served as his adjutant. "I was on my way to your home, sir. Thieves have taken the Golden Peacock from—"

Kiet silenced him with a hand flutter, reached inside his desk for an antacid tablet, and popped it in his mouth. He was certain he didn't want to hear more. "This medicine is marvelous, Binh."

"If you say so, sir. But if I may continue—"

"The Golden Peacock is indeed missing?"

Binh nodded sadly. Kiet closed his eyes, picturing the magnificent work of art, a peacock-shaped headdress that was at the same time massive and delicate. Sapphires and emeralds mounted on a pure gold armature colored the bird's plumage.

The icon was a representation of the actual feathered headdress worn by Prince Savhava, ancestor of Prince Pakse, in a battle that repelled an invading Chinese army. The year was 154 B.C. and this was the *last* time the Kingdom of Luong had been victorious in any conflict. It had been made three centuries ago, though for

two hundred years thereafter the finest gems taken from Luongan mines were added. In the sunlight, the countless facets of the hundreds of jewels were of such brilliance that many were forced to avert their eyes.

And next week was the annual Savhanakip celebration. In the grand parade capping Savhanakip, Prince Pakse, atop an elephant, would wear the Golden Peacock. During the rest of the year it was displayed in the National Museum, a place of reverence and contemplation, Kiet felt, that was being transformed into a thoroughfare for Western tourists.

What if it was not recovered and Prince Pakse did not wear it at Savhanakip, Kiet wondered? He obliterated the image of chaos and rioting before it could fully form. The Golden Peacock was more than a precious bauble to the Luongan male, he knew. It was the personification of manhood, of vicarious triumph, of that North American term *machismo*. To deprive him of it would be regarded as an attempt to geld.

"Who last saw it?" Kiet asked.

"The curator, yesterday afternoon. The Unknown Asia Tour group finished at five. He locked up and was gone before six. He discovered its absence when he reported to work to-

day. The alarm system was on, and there were no signs of forcible entry."

Ah yes, Kiet thought. The Unknown Asia Tour, the brainstorm of the newly formed Ministry of Tourism and its chief, Phorn Ridsa. Its itinerary included Indonesia, Thailand, Burma, and Sri Lanka, with Luong sandwiched somewhere in the middle. The stated purpose was to open an off-the-beaten-path experience for those adventurous souls willing to sample the unusual. Kiet's experience with the travelers had been that the majority were either academic types or budgeters who could not afford the crazed prices of Tokyo and Hong Kong. Ridsa, formerly an army colonel, a regimental commander stationed in the highlands, seemed to Kiet an unlikely choice to head such an endeavor.

"Don't they normally close at four?"

"Yes, sir, but with the tourism priority, the rules bend."

"Bend and evidently break," Bamsan Kiet said. "Have you taken measures?"

"Yes, sir," Binh said proudly. "All river vessels leaving their docks are being searched. I have the highways roadblocked. I've doubled personnel at the airport. Anyone trying to escape by air with the Golden Peacock

will never make it through the metal detectors."

If they are functioning today, Kiet thought, closing his eyes again. Binh had studied police science in America; he loved their technology. The detectors, however, were U.S. airport surplus, discards that inexplicably shut down or sounded alarms for no good reason. He put them on a par with computers given his department by the Soviets, shoddy devices that had long since burned out, victims of Hickorn's fluctuating electrical current.

"Let us hope they don't plan to smuggle it out piecemeal. The streets of Hickorn will become rivers of blood. The National Museum scene. Did you personally inspect it?"

"Yes, sir. Moments before you came in. But for the Golden Peacock being missing, nothing in the museum appears different or disturbed. With your permission, superintendent, I shall take a laboratory team there immediately to search for clues."

Kiet pictured Binh and his minions traipsing around with their fingerprint powder and magnifying glasses and evidence bags, making a futile mess of things. In Luong, he knew, clues were found in loose tongues, not under microscopes.

To spare the young captain

loss of face, he said, "Yes, an excellent idea, but later. Have the curator fabricate a reason for closing the museum today. Now, the tourists. Does it logically follow that one or more is involved?"

"Yes, sir. The curator complained of how tardy they were and how they were difficult to keep together as a group despite polite instructions to do so."

"They meandered, then, perhaps unlatching windows and reconnoitering the alarm system. How many Unknown Asia Tour people are we presently hosting?"

"Twenty, sir. They're staying at the Hickorn Continental, of course." Binh glanced at his watch. "In half an hour they will be meeting in the restaurant for breakfast, before embarking for a boat ride on the river."

Bamsan Kiet, a widower in his late forties, patted an ample midsection. "My stomach says that we should join them."

"A good opportunity for interrogation and searching of their rooms," Binh said eagerly. "We can bring in the suspicious ones for polygraph examination."

Ah, the lie detector gadget, Kiet thought. The Russians had given it to them several years ago, but it had gathered dust

for lack of a qualified operator until, ironically, a Luongan police officer was recently trained in the United States. Binh was itching to unleash it on a suspect.

"Splendid, captain. However, our first priority is discretion and tact. The Ministry of Tourism and this project, I understand, are quite important to His Royal Highness. We can't be indiscriminately attaching wires to guests, can we?"

"Well, no, sir," Binh admitted.

"And on the subject of discretion, how many people know about the Golden Peacock?"

"Including us and the curator and my men—" Binh ticked them off on his fingers "—only eleven."

Kiet groaned and stood up. "Only eleven. That means we have until noon before everybody in Hickorn knows."

Binh and Kiet walked two blocks to the corner of Avenue John F. Kennedy and Rue Ho Chi Minh, to the Hickorn Continental. A four-storied, stuccoed, tile-roofed affair, the Continental was Hickorn's tallest building. It had been built in the 1920's and was still owned by absentee Frenchmen. Though the establishment offended Kiet in many ways, its ground-level,

open-air restaurant served the best fried shrimp in Hickorn.

They took a table and sent their waiter for the tour leader. She was a comely young woman named Lin Aidit, who hurried over and whispered, "Superintendent, the Golden Peacock? Is it true?"

Kiet looked at Binh and said, "You see? Rumors in Hickorn spread like bacteria."

Then he glanced across the restaurant to the tourists, who were beginning their breakfasts. "Do they know, Miss Aidit?"

"If they do, they haven't let on, sir."

"You were at the museum late yesterday. Why?"

"The Minister of Tourism treated us to a slide show, which he narrated. It ran longer than expected."

Phorn Ridsa had a gift for conversation, Kiet recalled. "So by being tardy, your group had the museum to itself."

"Superintendent, you surely don't think—"

"No, no, no: But I must examine all possibilities. Did the group stay together at the museum? And what activities followed the visit?"

"Perhaps they wandered more freely than normal, but everybody behaved properly. There was nothing scheduled afterward. We returned here. Some

ate dinner. Some went sight-seeing."

"Is everyone breakfasting now?"

"I count only nineteen," Binh said eagerly. "Nineteen out of twenty."

"I know. Dr. Camber isn't there. I was about to check on him."

"Dr. Camber?"

"Yes, superintendent. Dr. Jerry Camber, a periodontist from Washington, D.C."

"A periodontist is a dentist who treats gum disease," Binh said.

Kiet looked at him. "Thank you, captain. And since you are so helpful, please find LaCroix."

Binh rose stiffly and walked off. "It must be nice to know everything," Kiet told Lin. "Now, what can you tell me of this Dr. Camber?"

"Really very little, superintendent. He is a nice man, a quiet man who likes to keep to himself. I find him odd, though."

"In what manner?"

"He takes no photographs and he buys no souvenirs. Isn't that odd behavior for a tourist?"

Before Kiet could answer, Binh was back with Gaston LaCroix, the Hickorn Continental's manager. LaCroix had been a clerk for the last French governor general, had married a Luongan woman, and had

stayed on after Independence. An antique, Kiet thought, but a cunning one with a sponge-like ear for gossip. Dressed as always in a white suit, he struck Kiet as an emaciated version of his favorite Western actor, Sydney Greenstreet.

"Superintendent, please allow me to say how sorry I am about the Golden Peacock. I trust that you will locate it soon."

"Naturally you would know, LaCroix. I need you to take us to a guest's room. Do you have your master key?"

LaCroix said that he did and escorted the police officers to Dr. Jerry Camber's room. "Do you believe that this individual is responsible, superintendent?"

"I believe nothing yet, LaCroix. Turn the key."

LaCroix did and they walked in to the sight of a man sprawled on the floor, obviously dead. Kiet figured him as a Caucasian in his thirties. He was fully clothed and of average height and weight. He was balding slightly and had tattoos on each forearm. Most noticeable was an ugly reddish welt that circled his neck.

Kiet looked away, pretending to examine the room. He breathed deeply and slowly, combating dizziness and nausea. If he became ill in the presence of Binh, the loss of face

would be irreparable. And LaCroix would either black-mail him or broadcast his squeamishness to Luong's farthest provinces.

Binh, meanwhile, had gone through the victim's wallet. "It is Dr. Camber," he said. "I'll order an autopsy immediately and bring my forensic team, too."

"Fine, fine," said Kiet, whose eyes were finally starting to focus. He did observe that the room bore no evidence of a struggle; Camber must have been overpowered quickly. "LaCroix, tell me what you know of this man."

The old Frenchman shrugged. "Please, superintendent, I do not snoop on my guests."

Binh had withdrawn his notebook and was busily making notes. Kiet motioned LaCroix into the hallway and asked, "Did anything else I should know about occur in your hotel last night?"

LaCroix shook his head no.

"Since the advent of the Ministry of Tourism and these affluent visitors, your average rent has doubled, has it not?"

"It is merely progress, superintendent. And they demand so much! Hot water any time of the night or day. Daily maid service. Ceiling fans that are operational. Our costs have become staggering!"

"Your corporate masters in Paris, are they aware of the extent of your rent increases? In your restaurant, too, I am paying much too much for your fried shrimp, excellent as it is."

LaCroix frowned. "I cannot trouble them with every tiny detail."

Kiet extended a thumb and forefinger to their limits. "The Luong Ordinance Book is thick, LaCroix. Many codes and regulations are obscure, open to interpretation. Price gouging and embezzlement, for instance."

LaCroix clapped bony hands. "Come to mention, there was a party of three army officers in the bar drinking for a while. If memory serves, Dr. Camber joined them briefly for a cocktail. I went to my office to work. When I departed for home, they were gone. I know nothing more."

Kiet believed him. LaCroix knew when to lie and when not to; his worried expression indicated that he had been bled dry of information.

He released LaCroix and called Binh out. Better that they talk here than in the company of a putrefying corpse. "Captain, your schooling was with the District of Columbia Police Department. Are they near Washington, D.C., Dr. Camber's home of record?"

Binh hesitated before saying, "Yes, sir. Very near."

"Good. Of course, I presume you have useful contacts with them. If Hickorn's telephone system is in working order today, I would like you to inquire about Dr. Camber."

"Yes, sir, but I was planning to oversee the museum investigation. Isn't that more important? Besides, shouldn't we inform our embassy in Washington first?"

"No, we should not. If you desire my opinion, the priority in the Golden Peacock affair is tattoos."

"Beg pardon?"

"Criminals and sailors and ne'er-do-wells wear tattoos. Wealthy dentists wear cologne."

Bamsan Kiet returned to his office. His day was dominated by lies, his lies, statements to all who asked that the theft of the Golden Peacock was a stupid and ugly rumor. Savhanakip would be as it had been forever, he promised. All is well.

His supply of antacid tablets had dwindled alarmingly. When a messenger arrived with a request from the American ambassador for a meeting, he broke open his last roll.

Shortly thereafter, Captain Binh entered, bursting with de-

velopments. "Superintendent, the coroner's preliminary report is that Jerry Camber died of strangulation. The murder weapon hasn't been found yet, but it is thought to be either a rope or a cord."

"Really?" Kiet said. "I'm more interested in your inquiry to your cronies in the American police department."

Binh tore pages from his notebook and gave them to Kiet. "I don't understand, superintendent. There must be two Jerry Cambers."

Kiet put the notes inside Camber's passport and stood. "Only on paper, captain. Only on paper."

Kiet was uncomfortable in foreign embassies, particularly those of the superpowers. In the American embassy, that discomfort was magnified by the climate therein. At least the Soviets' air conditioning functioned marginally at best. Here, it was like being in a refrigerator. These Americans and their efficiency, he thought; the perspiration adhering to my skin is a glaze of ice.

Ambassador Smithson would be in a foul mood, he knew, still smarting over a ceremony earlier in the month in which Prince Pakse redesignated Avenue Charles de Gaulle as Av-

enue Mikhail Gorbachev. But what has France done for us lately, he thought as he was ushered in.

The two men exchanged formal greetings and Smithson said, "I was disturbed to hear of the murder, superintendent. How is the investigation progressing?"

"Satisfactorily, Mr. Ambassador, though as yet we have no suspects."

"I've been told that it wasn't committed in the process of a burglary, Dr. Camber surprising a thief or whatnot."

"That is also my assessment, sir."

"It certainly is a bizarre coincidence that a prominent American periodontist was killed with Savhanakip a short time away, an American in one of the first tourist packages."

Here it comes, Kiet thought: a lecture on communism. The previous ambassador fretted endlessly about political prisoners and human rights. Smithson's obsession was guerilla warfare and communism. He hoped he could escape without a gaseous tirade on the domino theory.

"Disruption and confusion would be to the Luong Rouge's benefit, wouldn't it?"

Luong Rouge guerrillas had been sporadically active in the highlands for years, setting

plastique in warehouses and sniping at army convoys, but in Kiet's opinion their primary interest was the rich opium business that originated in the rugged and remote terrain. "Yes, Mr. Ambassador. We are exploring that possibility."

Smithson nodded grimly and winked. "It takes a single spark to ignite an inferno, doesn't it? I was posted in Saigon in the 1960's. I know how these things are."

Enough, Kiet thought as he took Camber's passport from his pocket. "Sir, a colleague of mine studied with your District of Columbia Police Department. Through a friend he had made there, he obtained some rather contradictory information regarding the late Dr. Jerry Camber."

"Such as?" Smithson asked tightly.

"Such as that Camber's dentistry credentials exist only on fabricated documents. Jerry Camber was a career criminal, a fugitive. His specialty was burglary and safecracking, his targets jewelry stores and the homes of the rich. He was capable of circumventing most electronic protective devices. Upon entry he would open safes and take what he wished.

"He was not infallible, however. Approximately six months ago, while perusing the wares

of a gemstone and precious metals broker in the middle of the night, he failed to detect a silent alarm. He was subsequently arrested and convicted. He was out on bail, awaiting sentencing, the date of which was a mere twenty-four hours after he departed from Los Angeles on this particular Unknown Asia Tour's initial flight."

Ambassador Smithson said nothing. He was an elegant man with a distinguished mane of gray and a carefully cultivated tan. It appeared to Kiet that his complexion was suddenly fading from Mediterranean to albino.

"With all due respect," Kiet could not resist adding, "I do not fully comprehend your American bail bond procedures. Here in Hickorn, when we apprehend so slippery a rascal, we confine him until trial so that an irresponsible impulse on his part does not deny him the privilege of proving himself innocent in a court of law."

"He probably had help from the other end," Smithson finally said.

"I agree, Mr. Ambassador. Since my colleague's sources are exhausted, I was hoping—"

"Can do," Smithson said, wrenching the telephone receiver from its cradle.

Kiet smiled and leaned back

in his chair. The rapidity of the procedure amazed him. The American embassy had its own telephone apparatus, satellite dish on the roof and all. Smithson punched buttons, gave crisp instructions to a member of his State Department in Washington, drummed a nervous fingertip cadence on his desktop for two minutes as a computer halfway around the world did its work, then hung up.

"Jerry Camber applied for the trip through and was processed by the Luongan embassy," Smithson said.

"Rather than through the American travel agency that has the contract for Unknown Asia Tours?"

"It seems so. Is that significant, superintendent?"

Kiet said that it might be and that he would inform the ambassador when and if anything developed. They shook hands and Kiet walked out into refreshing ninety degree, ninety percent humidity air. It was then that he realized that Smithson hadn't mentioned the Golden Peacock, that he was perhaps the only human being in the Kingdom of Luong who didn't *know*.

Minister of Tourism Phorn Ridsa was short and stocky. When he was a garrison com-

mander in the highlands, he wore a fatigue cap replete with army colonel's pips. Now, as a senior cabinet official, he dressed in impeccable pinstripes and went bareheaded. His head seemed too large for his body, his bald pate gleaming in even dim light.

Kiet, of course, kept these observations to himself. Common courtesy aside, Ridsa was a powerful man. His military connections were enduring, not to mention that he was related to Prince Pakse as all ministry heads were. If this interview wasn't handled cautiously, he knew, he could be tied and blindfolded against sandbags and the normally joyous Savhanakip would still be an ordeal of fire and blood.

Kiet told Ridsa that the murder investigation was progressing and that the remaining tourists had been cleared. "They are enjoying their boat ride, sir. We inconvenienced them as little as possible. It is my personal wish that they depart for Rangoon tonight with fond memories of their interim in Luong."

"Good, superintendent. You are making the best of a terrible situation. We are earning hard currency and these crimes may ruin everything. If Savhanakip erupts, as it will if the Golden Peacock isn't recovered, tourism is finished.

Need I tell you how much His Royal Highness and I counted on Unknown Asia Tours to reduce our balance of payments deficit?"

A politics lesson from Smithson followed by a primer on economics—Kiet was truly blessed. "No, you don't, sir."

"Two heinous crimes in a single day," Ridsa said, shaking his head. "Although they're obviously unrelated, the result may well be the closing of a window to the western world."

"His Royal Highness's idea to promote tourism is enlightened, if I may say so, sir. I will do my utmost to insure that it is not spoiled."

Ridsa laughed. "His idea? Superintendent, I almost lost my voice persuading him. My cousin exiles himself in the palace playing billiards. He expects Luong to care for itself."

"I suspected as much," Kiet said with an ingratiating smile. "When I heard that you took army retirement and came to Hickorn to lead the new ministry, I, among others, was excited."

"Thank you, superintendent," Ridsa said, sitting straighter in his chair.

"I don't want to raise false hopes, but resolution to one or both crimes might be near, sir. We are interrogating a suspect," Kiet lied.

"Splendid," Ridsa said, deadpan.

"A sneak thief who was apprehended in the Hickorn Continental last night while rifling a room next to Dr. Camber's. He claims that he had nothing to do with the murder, but he would, wouldn't he? He claims to have heard loud voices in Camber's room. He claims further to have peeked into the hall and seen several people he recognized leaving. He claims even further to have been so frightened by said recognition that he remained in the room hiding, thus delaying his escape, allowing my officers to catch him as they went door to door in pursuit of eyewitnesses."

"I look forward to hearing what you learn from him," Ridsa said.

"If he hasn't cooperated by the time I return to headquarters," Kiet said, wrinkling his face in what he hoped passed as a stern, sadistic expression, "we shall take extreme measures. A combination of our polygraph machine and, uh, more direct measures should bear fruit."

Kiet shook hands with Ridsa and said that he would be the first to know of any developments. He went outside and walked around the corner and got in the back of a taxicab. Captain Binh was behind the

wheel. In lieu of his always immaculate police uniform he was wearing bluejeans, wrinkled shirt, sunglasses, and a cap pulled low over his forehead. Binh frequently said that his favorite on-the-job training in the District of Columbia was covert operations and surveillance.

Within the hour, a soldier swung open iron gates and a small sedan accelerated from the Ministry of Tourism's driveway. It headed north on Rue Willie Mosconi. Kiet knew where it was going. The only connecting thoroughfare was Richard Nixon Boulevard, the link between downtown Hickorn and the airport.

But Kiet let Binh have his fun. When the sedan was at a safe interval, he patted his eager adjutant on the shoulder and said, "Follow that car."

"Cunning, superintendent. Cunning," said Prince Pakse as he shot his cue ball at the triangular rack, scattering balls every which way. "Flushing Phorn Ridsa as one might a game bird. Fear is a marvelous instrument of tactics."

"Thank you, Your Highness," said Bamsan Kiet. "Ridsa's protracted lecture to the tourists made them late for their mu-

seum visit, thus leaving it empty but for the group. Camber was able to prowl and make arrangements for his return in privacy, not bothered by any of the hundreds of our countrymen who daily view the Golden Peacock. That act provided a seed of suspicion."

"The package they took to the airport and surreptitiously placed in the postal station — how very disappointed I am in my second cousin," Prince Pakse said as he studied the configuration of the balls.

"With the Golden Peacock inside it and the package addressed to your nephew in Paris. Yes, Your Highness, you have every right to be disappointed in Minister Ridsa."

"Ex-Minister Ridsa, superintendent. I imagine their preference was to have the package routinely discovered nearer to Savhanakip."

"I agree," said Kiet.

"A cabal, a true conspiracy," Prince Pakse said, shaking his head. "Plotters assigned to our Washington embassy recruiting this Camber, this criminal, then Ridsa's army cronies killing him, then the subterfuge of my having the Golden Peacock stolen for personal monetary gain—it is difficult to fathom."

"It is, Your Highness. The outrage felt by your subjects upon discovery of your alleged

deed was to turn them against you, thus providing an easy gateway for a coup d'etat."

"It was wise of you to notify me before arresting them, superintendent. Officers loyal to me picked them up simultaneously before they could alert each other."

"Sheer cowardice, Your Highness. My humble department is no match for a regiment, let alone a company or platoon."

Prince Pakse smiled and shot. A ball fell into a corner pocket. The cue ball's deflected path took it to another ball, brushing it gently. That second ball dropped into a side pocket. "Ridsa and the three officers directly involved in the skulduggery will be tried in a court of law. The others, those who merely had knowledge of and gave passive consent to the plot, their complicity may be more difficult to prove. They deserve justice, and an acquittal is not the sort I have in mind."

"May I make a suggestion, Your Highness?"

"Please do; superintendent."

"Assign them to our foreign embassies as military attaches. The Soviet Union, for instance. It is the heart of their winter now. Snow, ice, and temperatures lower than a Luongan can comprehend."

Prince Pakse laughed. "Done. And I may find openings in North Korea and Albania, too. One final matter, superintendent. The conspirators in Washington have asked for political asylum. If granted, that would indeed be unfortunate."

"If our good friend Ambassador Smithson believed that the plotters were aligned in a coalition with the Luong Rouge—"

"An absurd theory."

"Agreed. However, a hint to the ambassador, an innuendo— He does have an active imagi-

nation where communism is concerned."

"And doubtless our defrocked diplomats would be returned to us in chains."

"That is entirely possible, Your Highness. I earlier witnessed his ability to get things done."

Prince Pakse leaned over the table, squinted, and took aim. "Would it be an imposition to ask you to call on him and make that innuendo, superintendent?"

Kiet grinned broadly. "Not at all, sir. Not at all."

SOLUTION TO THE MAY "UNSOLVED":

Melville's explanation of the Cornish Cliff Mystery was very simple when he gave it. Yet it was an ingenious trick that the two criminals adopted, and it would have completely succeeded had not our friends from the Puzzle Club accidentally appeared on the scene. This is what happened: When Lamson and Marsh reached the stile, Marsh alone walked to the top of the cliff, with Lamson's larger boots in his hands. Arrived at the edge of the cliff, he changed the boots and walked backwards to the stile, carrying his own boots.

This little maneuver accounts for the small footprints showing a deeper impression at the heel, and the larger prints a deeper impression at the toe; for a man will walk more heavily on his heels when going forward, but will make a deeper impression with the toes in walking backwards. It will also account for the fact that the large footprints were sometimes impressed over the smaller ones, but never the reverse; also for the circumstance that the larger footprints showed a shorter stride, for a man will necessarily take a smaller stride when walking backwards. The pocketbook was intentionally dropped to lead the police to discover the footprints and so be put on the wrong scent.

FICTION

Miss Nobody

by Jule Selbo



Illustration by Judy Mitchell

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No one thinks much of me at school. The truth is, no one thinks about me at all. Most of the time the teachers forget to ask me a question in class, and once I didn't turn in my homework for a week and Mr. Thornton didn't even notice. He's my homeroom teacher. He's always talking about how we students should appreciate our high school years because they are the best years of our lives. How, after high school, responsibility sets in and you wake up in the morning thinking about what you *have* to do, not what you *want* to do. I figure if high school is the best years of my life, I don't have anything to look forward to. Except for maybe reading all the detective stories that have ever been written.

Since nobody talks to me at school (maybe it's because my hair is a nondescript brown and I'm average height and weight and my eyes are grey and my favorite color is beige), I spend most of my time reading. Even in class when the teacher starts to talk about Square Roots or Medieval Architecture or Laser Light, I read. Something still sinks in, and I pass every test. Of course I get a C—average.

I wish I'd been reading the day I saw Greg Lancaster get shot in the leg.

I was in study hall, which takes place in the library. I was sitting in the History of Indiana section looking up at the stacks, reading the titles on the spines of the books about Gary, Indiana. The national crime figures had come out that week, and Gary was high on the list for murders committed that year. I was wondering if my home town had always been so lawless. If maybe we had a super duper detective force to root out criminals, people would feel safer walking home at night. I was thinking that maybe I might be a victim someday, and then thought probably not. Not even a criminal would notice me.

Anyway, I was sitting right there, blending into the scenery as usual, and Greg Lancaster, the most popular boy in school, swaggered down the History of Indiana aisle. He was eating a candy bar with one hand (if Miss Kingston saw him, he'd be the most popular boy in school with chocolate crammed down his throat) and letting one hand kind of sweep against all the books on the shelf.

He stopped about fifty feet from me. I was the only one sitting at the table at the aisle's end. Greg looked around to see if anybody was watching him. I was leaned up against the beige wall reading my paper-bag-covered detective novel (covered, of course, so no one

could tell I wasn't studying chemistry, if they cared to look).

Greg kind of squinted in my direction. Like he couldn't figure out if I were a person or a lump at the table. His right hand took a book off the shelf. His left hand fed his mouth the last of the candy bar and then reached into his shirt pocket and took out something and started to reach towards the shelf. Then suddenly this person with a stocking-cap mask over his face appeared in the aisle with a gun pointed at Greg. The person shot Greg. In the leg.

I was immobile. I heard the shot and saw everything, but I couldn't yell or scream or anything. Greg fell to the ground real fast, and the stocking-cap-masked person ran down the aisle, grabbed a book, and ran out the EXIT door right around the corner.

Miss Kingston heard the shot. She came running from the biography section, and about fifteen kids came running, too. Greg's girlfriend, pretty Hazel Henderson, screamed pretty loud. Miss Kingston ran back to her desk and called the principal. With lightning speed, there were security guards around, and we were all herded into the auditorium and told to sit quiet and everything would be okay.

I sat so I could see out the door of the auditorium. They took Greg away on a stretcher.

The police came and started taking every kid, one by one, into the light booth at the back of the auditorium. They said they wanted to get everyone's version of the story. First they took Hazel, then a girl who'd been on the other side of the room, then a boy who'd just come back from the bathroom, and then—well, you can figure that out. When it was my turn, I stood up and started for the light booth. I'd show them. I knew more than anybody and they'd kept me till last. I'd show the police not to treat me like everyone else treated me.

I got to the door of the light booth and the policeman in charge said in a loud voice so as to fill the auditorium, "Thank you, everybody, for your help. We have all your names and phone numbers. We may be calling on you again in the near future. We are sure this is an isolated incident. Do not be afraid to go back to class. Thank you very much."

I had read somewhere in my detective books that everyone has a breaking point. Hostages can only hold out so long. Criminals all have a soft spot (could be they love their mother, or they hate their mother, or they have no mother and are searching for one). Even everyday people can be pushed only so far before they retal-

iate. I'd had it. I was tired of being Miss Nobody. And I knew just how I was going to make people sit up and notice.

Instead of going to advanced algebra, I went back to the library.

Miss Kingston was helping a freshman find research material in the Natural Science section. A group of junior girls were trading lipsticks in the corner. A few eggheads were working at the computers. I walked right through the middle of the room, and no one looked at me. I'd show them.

I approached the History of Indiana stacks quietly. How would Flynn do this? Would Miss Marple have a plan? Would Archie consult with Wolfe before beginning? This was the logical beginning. The scene of the crime.

I sat down again where I'd been sitting when the crime was committed. I figured out where Greg had been standing by eyeballing the distance between my table and where he'd stopped to take out a book. I walked down the aisle. He had reached out at shoulder level (Greg was about five feet ten). He had probably been reaching for the fourth shelf. I looked at the books on the shelf. *Indiana and the Indians. The Industrial History of Indiana. The Truth About Indiana.* (Who had been lying, I wondered.) *Tall Tales, A Folk History of Indiana.* Then there was an empty space. Probably the book the stocking-cap-masked person had taken.

There might be something significant about *what* book he took. Maybe Miss Kingston could tell me what usually stands between *Tall Tales, A Folk History of Indiana* and *Winsome Indiana Songs*. I thought I'd try to get Miss Kingston's attention.

Then I saw it. It was a little envelope, peeking out of the top of *Winsome Indiana Songs*. I took the book off the shelf and opened it. The envelope was lying right before my eyes. There was writing on it—it said *Property of Greg Lancaster. Private. Do Not Open.*

The person with the gun must have taken the wrong book.

I put the envelope in my pocket.

"What are you doing back here?"

I looked around. Miss Kingston stood with her hands on her scrawny hips and glared at me through her designer eyeglasses.

"Who? Me?" I looked behind me. I wasn't used to people noticing where I was.

"No one is allowed back here. There's been a crime committed here, young lady." She looked at me suspiciously.

"I—'m doing research for a, ahhh, history class."

"You come out of this aisle right now. If you need a book, I'll get

it for you. Now, march, right now. What is your name?"

"Me? Ahhh, Jane Marie Smith, ma'am."

"What year are you?"

"Senior, ma'am."

"You transfer in this year?"

"No, ma'am, I've been at this school for four years."

"How come I've never noticed you before?"

"I don't know, ma'am. I've noticed you."

She gave me a good strong glare and said we were going down to the principal's office.

The secretaries looked up as Miss Kingston dragged me into the office area. I heard their voices behind us as we walked past them. "Who is that girl?" "Must be a new girl." "No, never seen her before."

The principal was on the phone to the police when Miss Kingston barged us in.

"I found this girl in the stacks, Mr. Glock. Right where Greg Lancaster was shot. She says she's been a student here for four years, but I think she's lying. Seems like an interesting coincidence she should be in the same place not an hour after the shooting."

"What's your name?"

I told him. He told Miss Kingston to ask his secretary to find my file, if indeed I had one.

"What was the final score of the Gary Giants versus the Clay Pigeons football game last week?" he asked me.

"I don't pay much attention to football."

"What band played at the Homecoming Dance?"

"I didn't go to the dance," I said. He didn't have to rub it in.

"Who's the senior class president?"

I knew the answer to that one. "Greg Lancaster."

Mr. Glock nodded at me. "Funny you should know that and only that," he said.

Miss Kingston came back with my file. "Seems there is a senior named Jane Marie Smith," she sniffed. "Straight C student."

There was a picture of me in my file. I happened to be wearing the same color beige sweater as the beige canvas background. My hair looked beige, too. Mr. Glock looked at the picture, then at me.

"All right, Jane Marie Smith." He said my name as if he was sure to remember it. "You can go back to class. Stay out of the library."

I left the office. All the secretaries stopped to stare at me.

I went to the bathroom and locked myself in a stall. I took the envelope out of my pocket and wondered whether I should open it. I figured Sherlock would've opened it. Charlie Chan would have opened it and committed it to memory by now. Sam Spade would probably have read it and rolled it and smoked it. I opened the envelope.

Ten one thousand dollar bills were tied into a tight little wad. My heart started pounding like crazy, and I could feel my face turn red. My palms were sweating, too. And my breath—I felt as if I were going to faint.

The class bell sounded. I was due at English 401 (also my home-room and last class of the day) in five minutes. I didn't want Mr. Glock to check up on me and find me not in the right place. I put the money back in the envelope and put it in my pocket. Then I took it out of my pocket. I heard the door to the bathroom open and girls' voices. The juniors were probably here to put on their lipstick. I decided to put the envelope in my bra.

When I stepped out of the stall, everyone turned to look at me. I don't know why, no one ever had before. One girl even asked me what blush I used, she liked the color of my cheeks. I looked at her funny and said the first thing that came to my mind. "*Blood.*" Everyone stopped talking then and looked at me again. Someone started giggling nervously, and I heard her say as I left the room, "Who's that weird girl?"

Lucky I went to English class because Mr. Glock did come in and talk to my teacher. I saw them looking at me. Then Mr. Glock left and Mr. Thornton asked me who killed Hamlet's father. I was so nervous I said Shakespeare, and everyone laughed. Mr. Thornton made a note in his book about me and told me to prepare Ophelia's mad speech for recitation in class the next day. I wasn't happy to hear that.

Class was over, finally. Everyone was still talking about Greg and the shooting, but it didn't stop them from going to football practice or cheerleading practice or play rehearsal. The halls quieted down pretty fast. I waited behind a pillar in the hallway until Miss Kingston left the library.

I remembered reading Nancy Drew mysteries when I was in grade school. She always had so much guts. I figured she'd go back to the library and see if there wasn't just one more clue.

I opened the doors and slipped in. No lights were on, and the windows let in just enough light to see. Certainly not enough to

make me feel safe. I went back to the History of Indiana stacks. It was extra dark back there because the books blocked the light from the window.

I thought maybe I'd just go home. Tomorrow I could tell Mr. Glock about the envelope and let the police take care of it. That seemed like a good idea. I turned to leave the stacks and found myself looking right into the face of the stocking-cap-masked shooter.

We stood there staring at each other for a moment. His eyes were a light blue, and he had real black eyelashes. The hole for his mouth was small, but he had white, straight teeth. He was kind of snorting through his nose, like Brian Hargrave did in English 401. Like he had asthma or something, whatever that is that keeps your nose running all year long. I remembered the day Brian got his braces off; he went to the front of the class and smiled real big and everyone cheered. Then he wore his retainer with the cord that goes outside your mouth and around the back of your neck for a month. He still used to kiss his girlfriend in the halls, and I wondered what thrill she got out of kissing metal wires. Brian had those real light, kind of blue eyes that water badly in the winter cold. The more I thought about it in that split second, the more I thought this stocking-cap-masked shooter was Brian Hargrave.

"Who are you?" he rasped.

"I'm a freshman. I just transferred in, and I fell asleep in the library and just woke up and it's time to go home so bye—" I lied. I figured he hadn't ever noticed me. Maybe he'd let me go.

"Tough luck, freshman," he said.

He took hold of me and turned me around and slammed me up against the stacks. He put a long woolen scarf around my face, then pulled it so it dug into my mouth. I couldn't scream. It all happened so fast I didn't even think of screaming until it was too late. Then he pushed me to the ground. Right next to me was a book, *Topography of Indiana*. It struck me that that was probably the book he'd taken by mistake. It would've gone right next to *Winsome Indiana Songs*.

He started going through the shelves like a madman. He pulled books off and let them fall on the floor. He wasn't trying to be quiet. He was panting and groaning and cursing and carrying on. Finally he kicked the shelves and the whole stack started tilting. He kicked it again and yelled something about wanting to kill Greg Lancaster. The whole stack tumbled over. I was thankful it

fell away from me; I didn't want to be crushed by the History of Indiana.

When the books fell, the lights went on in the library. I thought that was a little odd, but then I heard voices and I saw big black shoes headed my way and realized a rescue could be in process. I squirmed and made some feeble noises. Brian was still poring through the books. He tore off his stocking-cap mask and got down on his hands and knees and started picking up the books and throwing them against the wall.

A policeman finally stopped him. Brian fought him off for a short bit but then collapsed, crying. He wailed as they took him out of the library, "Greg took my stash, I need my stash. I gotta have my stash." It all of a sudden made sense to me that Brian was hooked on cocaine. I wasn't dumb enough to think that the white powder I'd once seen on his nose was frostbite, or what was left of eating a powdered sugar doughnut, but—I felt a little sad for him.

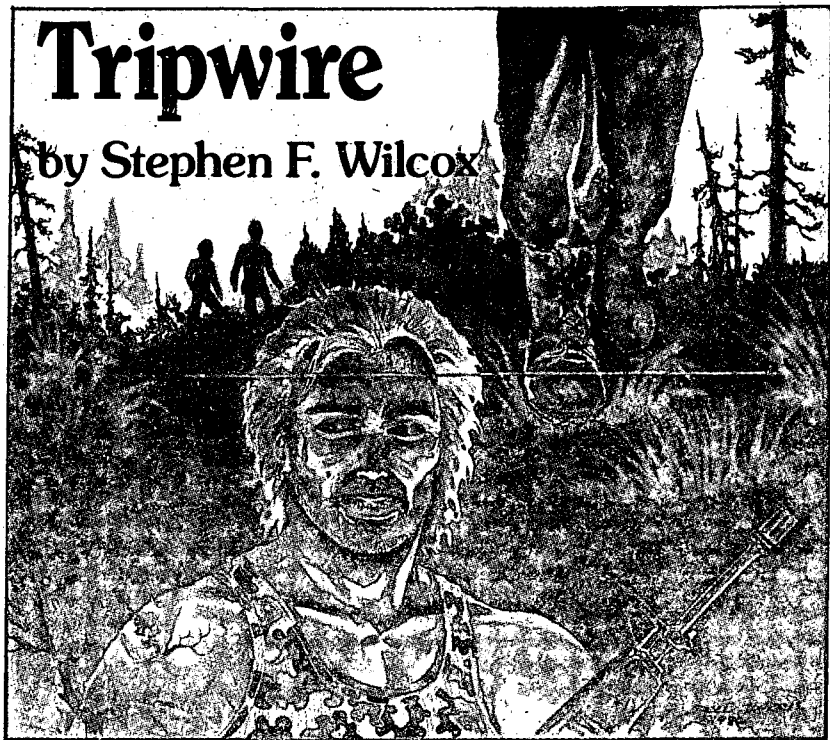
Mr. Glock untied me. Miss Kingston glared at me. Two nice policemen brought me a cup of tea and sat down and paid attention to me. I told them that I had seen the whole thing—Greg getting shot, the stocking-cap-masked shooter getting away, grabbing a book. I told them I found an envelope in *Winsome Indiana Songs*. They asked me where it was. I asked them to turn around and then took it out of my private hiding place. I told them if they had bothered to ask me in the first place, the history stack would still be standing. Then I asked if I could go home, and the two nice policemen offered to drive me there.

It was nice to see the football team and the cheerleaders and the cross country team stop what they were doing and watch me as I left the school with the policemen.

And I knew that tomorrow in English 401 I would recite Ophelia's mad speech like Nora Charles would have recited it to Nick—trippingly on the tongue.

Tripwire

by Stephen F. Wilcox



The jungle was alive; seductive, deceitful, like a young girl in a Saigon alley. He could feel it breathing under him, rising and falling against his stomach, as he lay face down on the ground.

The noises—quiet, innocent, alarmed—surrounded him. Jungle chatter everywhere. Everywhere but ten o'clock. A treacherous silence called to him from ten o'clock.

His eyes, only the eyes, shifted thirty degrees left, scanned the lush terrain, and locked on. They were there, at ten o'clock, fifty yards beyond the treeline, standing in the tall grass and strung out single file.

Like a bunch of stupid damn turkeys, he thought, flashing on Gary Cooper in *Sergeant York*. He raised the M-16, rested the barrel on a fallen branch, and sighted. Easy now, he

coached himself, right to left, last man first and first man last. He took a deep breath and held it, then fired. One long burst; a second burst, shorter. Cursing, he jumped up and took aim, firing one final round. He was out of the trees and running through the high grass before the last echoes of gunfire could fade away.

One, two, three, four dead Indians. He strolled along the fence line, rifle slung loose across his bare back, admiring his marksmanship. Four Bud cans blown away, with minimal peripheral damage to the fenceposts. Too bad old Sergeant Boyles wasn't here to see it. "Four of 'em, tryin' to sneak through the perimeter?" the sarge would say. "Nice goin', Drew, but, say, why don't we put down six? Push up the CO's body count, right?"

Droplets of sweat coursed down Drew's brow, blurring his vision. He wiped a forearm across his face and looked back toward the ridge. The sun glared above the spruce trees. He sighed as he picked up the mangled beer cans—twenty cents' worth of returnables wasted, but what the hell. Nine in the morning, and already the air was bloated with moisture. He turned back toward the cabin. It would be another punishing day in the pine forest.

“D”on’t tell me you wouldn’t if she gave you the chance.” Ron Tessi heaved his pack into the trunk and stepped back.

“Not even with your lips, buddy.” Carl Anderson shook his head. “I mean, are you sure you’ve actually seen this chick up close? We’re talking missing link here.”

“That’s the problem with you young guys,” Dave Propeski grunted as he lifted the cooler. “You look for quality when it’s quantity that counts. And availability.”

“Yeah,” Tessi said. “Once you been married a few years, a girl like that starts to look real good.”

“Hey, Ron,” Propeski said, “you bring the compass?”

“In the glove compartment.” Tessi tossed his bush hat through the rolled-down window and onto the back seat. “Jeez, it’s gonna be a scorcher. Hope it’s cooler down there in the hills.”

“Bound to be,” Propeski said as he rummaged through the Volvo’s glove compartment. “How ’bout the extra CO-2 cartridges, Ron? I don’t see ’em in here.”

“They’re in the satchel with the pistols, Mother. Relax, Dave, everything’s here. Guns, ammo, camping gear, camouflage

clothes, food, beer, you, me, and Carl. So get in the car already and let's go."

The members of Squad B climbed into the car. Propeski, at forty-two the oldest of the three, got behind the wheel. Tessi, who had turned thirty-six the week before, rode shotgun. That left the back seat, wedged in next to a spare case of beer, for Anderson.

Each man conformed to the seating arrangement automatically, accepting his place in the car as naturally as he recognized his place in the squad. It wasn't a difficult adaptation after all, mirroring as it did the men's relationship in the office.

Propeski, the driver and charter member of the Six Corners Irregulars, was also senior accounts rep at the Chambers Advertising and Public Relations Agency. Tessi was the agency's creative director, a position that put him roughly equal to Propeski in the firm's executive pecking order but six thousand dollars per annum behind on the firm's salary scale.

Anderson, at twenty-six, had been with Chambers for four years, signing on right out of college. His rise from junior copywriter to assistant creative director had been quick, but not so quick that he hadn't had time to learn the nuances of the agency. The obligatory cocktail

parties, seating priorities at business lunches and ball games, dress codes and office protocol; not as important as good copy, perhaps, but a close second.

Corporate gamesmanship. That's what put Anderson in the back seat of Dave Propeski's Volvo on a stifling Saturday morning, riding off to the southern hill country for a weekend of bang-bang-shoot-em-up. Two days of instant chicken noodle soup and mosquito bites and sweaty nights in a pup tent. He'd never understand why his bosses couldn't take up golf like other executives.

"Hey, Carl, I meant to tell you I liked those layouts on the QuadCorp account." Ron Tessi, already bored with the monotonous expressway view, half-turned in the front passenger seat. "Primo stuff, really."

"Thanks. I'm kinda pleased with it myself," Anderson said. "The positioning of the copy especially, with the use of white space . . ."

"C'mon, guys," Propeski cut in. "I thought we agreed to deep-six the shop talk when we're on a combat action."

"You're one hundred percent right." Tessi winked at Anderson. "Gotta develop the proper mindset, hey, David? Hut, two, and all that crap."

Propeski laughed. "Okay, okay. It's just that these guys from the Midtown Marauders are good, you know? I mean, if they wipe us out, we'll never hear the end of it."

"The loneliness of command," Tessi sighed dramatically. "Don't worry, Dave. Those Marauders are gonna look like something out of Picasso's red period when we get through with them."

"Picasso didn't have a red period."

Tessi turned and winked again at Anderson. "The man's a literalist, Carl. Just like MacArthur."

The little cabin reverberated with the pounding beat of the Creedence Clearwater Revival. "Born on the Bayou." Drew bobbed his head in time as he ran the knifeblade across the whetstone. He sat on the fireplace hearth, his back resting against fieldstone, soaking up the relative coolness of the coarse rock. He remembered Sergeant Boyles again, telling about growing up on his folks' North Dakota farm.

"Ya freeeze all winter and bake all summer, son, that's for sure," the sarge had said. "And nothin' in between."

"Extreme," Drew said as he ran his thumb down the knife-

blade, pleased with the lethal edge he was creating.

It was that way in Drew's hills, too: the roller coaster ride of the seasons. Fire and ice, bracketed by the brevity of spring and fall. The previous winter had been long and severe. But memories just a few months old, of deep powder and frozen streams and the sobering coldness of his hilly retreat, were pushed back now by the steamy summer air, when all the world was green.

A sharp click overrode the music pouring from the small speakers mounted on the ceiling rafters. Drew looked up just as the song died in mid-chorus.

"Damn. Son of a . . ." Drew set the whetstone on the hearth and resheathed the knife, then crossed to the compact stereo outfit and poked the eject button on the tape deck. The tape in the cassette, brittle with age and worn from a decade's worth of use, had snapped again. He put the tip of his little finger in one of the sprockets and slowly backed up the crumpled tail of tape that trailed away towards the floor. "Just wound too tight," he assured himself.

The Six Corners Irregulars were deployed in a half moon along the jutting, eroded east bank of the creek, their nylon backpack

tents bunched up in threes and fours according to squad. Sugar maples provided the camp with shade, the creek provided water, and a rounded hill to the rear provided good cover and a panoramic view of the surrounding forests and meadows. The Midtown Marauders wouldn't stage one of their infamous daylight raids on this camp.

Dave Propeski double-timed across the camp, from HQ tent to Squad B's position on the southern end of the crescent, and plopped down onto the grass.

"I guess that hike up here from the rendezvous point took more out of me than I thought," he said, blotting his brow with a bandana. "Hardly could get a word out at the briefing just now."

"Tell me about it," Tessi moaned dramatically, barely lifting his head from its resting place on his knapsack. "I don't see why we couldn't take the cars farther in. We coulda brought along more beer, for one thing. There's that perfectly good fire road, for chris-sake. We coulda driven up that to within a half mile of this camp."

"That's for forestry personnel only," Propeski reminded him for the third time. "'Sides, that little ten mile forced march was designed to get us into fighting shape for the Marauders. Take

a little of that suet off, Ron."

"Suet?" Tessi squeezed his sides. "These are love handles. Ask Suzy if you don't believe me."

"It wasn't the ten miles that was so bad," Carl Anderson crawled out of his tent. "It's the heat and humidity. I've played six sets of tennis and not broken a sweat like that."

"Yeah, well, I'm afraid we haven't broken our last sweat of the day, either."

"Uh-oh," groaned Tessi.

Anderson asked, "Now what? Not recon, Dave. Please don't tell me we pulled reconnaissance patrol."

"It's our turn again." Propeski shrugged. "What can I tell you?"

"Kinda damn late in the afternoon to send out a recon patrol, isn't it?" Tessi asked, sitting up.

"Barney wants to try and get a fix on the Marauders' camp before the battle tomorrow." Barney was Bernard Tollin, founder of the Irregulars and an investment adviser for one of the large banks clustered in the Six Corners, the city's financial district. "We're supposed to swing around to the south, as far as the boundary for the wildlife preserve, then head north till we locate the Marauders. An hour out and an hour back oughta do it."

Drew finished loading the last bushel basket into the back of the pickup and sat down on the truck's wooden rear bumper, using an index finger to wipe away the bank of perspiration welling above his eyebrows.

It had been a good month for scavenging; he had gathered more than enough copper wire and flattened tin cans and empty beer and soda bottles to justify a trip into town to the scrap yard and the recycling center and the supermarket. But he had put it off for two days, ever since the worst of the summer heat began, and even now, with everything loaded into the bed of the rusted Dodge, he knew he wouldn't make the trip in. Not today.

"Freakin' civvy mothers!" The curse jumped out of his mouth and vibrated like an aftershock across the torpid air and was lost in the rank and file of tall pines that surrounded the cabin.

Town wasn't a problem at first. Once a month—sometimes more, if pickings were good—Drew had taken the long drive into Steubenberg with the Dodge's bed filled with other people's leavings. FINE FOR LITTERING. That's what the signs along the access road to the state lands said, and Drew had a laugh every time he saw them. It sure was fine for lit-

tering down there in the valley, along the access roads, where the weekend woodsmen with their four-wheeled houses hunted and pecked for an open site with electric hookup for the air conditioning and the color TV and called it camping. Lined up on the lip of the forest, not twenty feet away from the gravel service roads, RV's by the score formed their own sheetmetal shantytown every summer weekend. And every summer Monday morning Drew would make the rounds and return to the cabin with a pauper's fortune in empty bottles and broken toys and discarded paperback romance novels and tangled fishing reels and on and on.

And town hadn't been a problem, not at first. He'd come here cold, after buying the old hunting cabin with the money his uncle had given him to get him out of his hair. But he'd settled in all right, made the right contacts. The old maid at the used bookstore, whose brother died in Korea the year Drew was born, never quibbled about sprung bindings or torn dust jackets. The people at the recycling center were professional and indifferent, which suited Drew. The salvage yard was always ready to deal, and the old guy at the town dump who shot rats with a twenty-

two pistol and let Drew pick out the innards of junked washing machines and refrigerators—he was okay, too, for all his stories about Anzio and the North African campaign.

But then the first summer heat had come like a reminder and there was Drew on Main Street, leaving the bookstore with \$6.25 in his pocket and on his way out to the salvage yard when the shots came. Four, five, six of them; that explosive, unmistakable pop-pop-pop of an AK-47.

Drew had thrown himself off the sidewalk into the gutter, knocking over a wire trash basket and skinning both elbows. Head down, cinders grinding into his chest, hands trembling, lost. Until the fat man with the red face came out of the open machine-shop door and pointed back into the building and explained about the hydraulic metal stamping machines inside and the horrific popping sounds as the armature came down.

"Civvy bastards," Drew said grimly, remembering the faces of the fat man and the woman with the kid in a stroller and the guy in the Camaro who tried to pull up to the curb but stopped dead when he saw Drew lying there in the gutter. And all of them staring at him like he was a freak, taking in his

faded fatigues and the screaming eagle patch on his shoulder.

He pushed himself off the Dodge's bumper and looked off toward the woods. Too damn hot for Steubenberg, and the fish wouldn't be biting, either. But the garden needed tending and there was time to check the traplines along the perimeter. He moved off slowly toward the shed and began singing low and off key, Creedence again, "Run Through the Jungle."

“A n hour out and an hour back, huh?” Ron Tessi bitched, more than two hours after Squad B had set off from base camp.

"All right!" Dave Propeski snapped. "You're the one forgot the damn compass."

"You had the map, for chris-sake, I figured you'd bring the lousy compass."

Propeski sighed and lowered himself onto a fallen log, shrugging off his lightweight nylon knapsack. Tessi threw up his hands, imploring the heavens, then he, too, sat on the log. Carl Anderson straggled into the tiny clearing in the dense pine forest, squinted up to note the position of the sun, and said, "If it's five o'clock and the sun's off our left shoulders, we must be heading north, aren't we?"

Tessi looked up with a bland stare but said nothing as he absently fingered the stock of the air pistol tucked into his belt. Propeski, who was studying the map, said, "Sure, at the moment, but that doesn't tell us where we are now. Or where we'll end up if we keep on in this direction."

"Yeah, but we know the state park area is north. So if we just keep on . . ."

"Carl," Propeski explained again, "we don't know how far to the southeast we are here. Which means we could go due north and miss the state land entirely, or worse. We could walk right into the Midtown Marauders' base camp and spend the rest of the weekend as POW's."

Tessi thought about cold beer and the evening steak roast the Six Corners Irregulars were planning and shook his head. "If you knew how to read that map, David, we wouldn't have that worry." He couldn't resist the dig. Dave and his superior attitude, just because he'd been in the army and pulled a hitch in West Germany in '63. Like Ron was some kind of wimp because he'd had a college deferment in the late sixties and, afterward, a wife and kid to support.

Propeski said evenly, "The map is wrong, that's all. If it wasn't, we'd never have come

to that river and had to cut so far south." He added pointedly, "And if you hadn't forgotten the compass, we could shoot an azimuth and figure our way out of this."

And if I had bullets instead of red paint capsules in this gun, Tessi thought, I could shoot you in the ass and watch your brains leak out.

Anderson adjusted the air pistol in his belt, wishing it would stop digging into his hip, wishing it were a tennis racket, seeing himself in the racket club lounge with a tall gin and tonic in hand and a tall blonde at his side. "So, what do we do?"

"Well," Propeski drew it out, allowing himself extra time to consider his answer, a tactic he'd learned well in countless agency planning sessions. "If we double back and head a little farther southeast, we have to come to the county road eventually. That'd give us our bearings anyway, and we could make our way back to base along the fire roads. Maybe even catch a lift with one of the fire wardens." It was an ignominious method, to say the least, but Propeski's stomach was starting to growl and he, too, was thinking about the steak roast.

By six thirty the garden had been weeded and the security lines along the perimeter checked.

The sky had darkened with storm clouds, sending great plodding shadows down the hills and through the trees. But the heat persisted, stuck at ninety degrees with humidity to match, punctuated by the high drone of a cicada.

Drew sat on the cabin's small covered porch in an aluminum lawn chair he had liberated from the Steubenberg dump. In his hand was needle and heavy thread and in his lap a jungle combat boot, its canvas side vent slightly torn along the seam. Grunting with the effort, he worked the needle into the stubborn material, then cursed sharply as the point suddenly slipped through and pricked the tip of his left index finger.

Disgusted, he dropped the boot onto the worn porch floor and squeezed the yellowed callus on his finger. A spot of red blood formed slowly as Drew watched, transported, the sweat coursing down his back, the cicada making its jungle noises, the leaden sky foreshadowing a violent storm in the rain forest.

Ron Tessi, impatient, angry, moved ahead of the others, tramping down the heavy brush and ignoring the thorny branches that dragged at his calves and snapped back behind him. Why, he asked himself, did a grown

man have to play these games? But he knew, without looking too deep, that it was all tied up with old movies on the late show and the wars his father and grandfather had seen and the puzzling realization that somehow he had missed out on the most significant event of his youth. He had not risked, had never been tested, but found himself, at thirty-six, wanting answers to questions he had never had to face.

He pushed away a heavy pine bough and did a double take, then turned to yell back, "Hey, there's a cabin or something up ahead about..." But he was moving again as he spoke and his brain didn't register the persistent tug at his right ankle before the tripwire did its job.

Thirty yards back, Dave Propeski and Carl Anderson heard the muffled whoosh and the terrible scream and saw their friend go down flailing into the dense brush.

Drew heard it, too, there on the cabin porch, thinking absently, as he pulled on his jungle combat boot, funny what you can do with a piece of stovepipe, some gunpowder, a fistful of carpet tacks, and a dry cell battery. A claymore would have been better, or even a grenade with its pin wired, Drew reasoned as he picked up his rifle.

But it ain't always easy keeping a combat team supplied in the field, Sergeant Boyles had said, and a good soldier knew how to make do.

Running low as he crossed the clearing to the treeline, Drew moved to the right, up the hill, then back to the left, dog-legging to a spot just above and twenty yards removed from the site of the attempted infiltration.

There they were, three of them, one down on the ground with his hands wrapped around his calf, his two buddies standing over him. All three dressed in camouflage gear, each with a sidearm.

So easy, Drew thought, as he straightened and raised the rifle to his shoulder.

The pain wasn't nearly as bad as the scare the explosion had given him, Ron Tessi was telling Dave and Carl. His hands gingerly explored the calf, tearing away the shredded pants leg and picking out the few carpet tacks that had found flesh.

"Not even bleeding too bad."

"Yeah, but who the hell would . . ." Dave Propeski started to ask the question they all were thinking, then suddenly pitched forward, hitting the ground just as the sound of the shots carried to Tessi's ears.

Tessi saw the figure up the

hill then, rifle at the ready. "Down, Carl, fast!" Tessi holstered, pulling the younger man with him as he crawled behind the nearest tree. "Jesus," he said, looking out at the fallen figure of Dave Propeski and the red mess of his exploded skull.

"Oh God, oh God," Anderson cried. "Dave . . ."

"Calm down, Carl, and keep low, for chrissake," Tessi hissed. He peered cautiously around the tree. "Hey, you up there! This is crazy . . . I mean, what's it all about?"

From his spot on the hill, Drew called back, "You speak good English for a slant. You learn that at Hanoi U.?"

"Hanoi U.?" Tessi said. God, some burnout up there with an automatic rifle and a forest full of booby traps. "Listen, buddy, you made a mistake, okay? We're friendlies."

"Yeah?" Drew yelled. "So who won the World Series last year?" he asked, then started giggling.

"Detroit, okay?" Tessi said. "Look, we're just some guys from the city, out here for the weekend."

"In those clothes? Carryin' 45 automatics?"

"We're here for a mock battle with some other guys, a kind of club thing, you know?" Tessi called out. "We got lost. Look, these are just air pistols loaded with red paint capsules." He

paused, trying to spot the guy again, but he had moved from his position on the hill. "Hey, buddy, you hear me? We were just playing a game and got lost, that's all. Vietnam is history, man."

A branch snapped off to the left. Tessi emerged from behind the tree as Drew came at him at a trot, rifle hip-high and firing. The bullets buzzed by and thudded into the tree behind Tessi as, reflexively, he pulled the air pistol from his belt and fired at the onrushing madman.

Just like in the movies, Tessi remembered thinking as his lucky shot hit Drew in the forehead, sending a flood of sticky red acrylic paint down into those wild eyes.

Drew dropped the rifle, his eyes stinging. He ran a hand across his face and saw it come away soaked crimson. Half blinded, fear and rage impelling him, he ran away from the man with the pistol, off into the brush, frantic for the jungle's steaming embrace. Until stumbling on a gnarled root and falling head first, arms outstretched, slam-

ming down across the tripwire. Then the muffled whoosh as the carpet tacks tore into the unprotected skin of his neck and ripped open the jugular; the paint running down his face and mixing with the gushing blood until no one could tell the difference.

And Drew, lying on his stomach, felt the ground breathing under him, and sang somewhere deep inside his head; Creedence; "Run Through the Jungle."

Gotta run...

They were inside the little cabin, staring around at the stacks of comic books and the old movie posters on the walls. John Wayne in *The Green Berets*. Gary Cooper as Sergeant York, Audie Murphy, Clint Eastwood, Robert Mitchum, Sylvester Stallone.

"He was crazy, Ron," Carl Anderson was saying. "I mean, we're lucky to be alive."

"No," Tessi said, unaware of the empty air pistol in his hand or the tears running down his face, mixing with the sweat. "The good guys always win. Everybody knows that."

MYSTERY CLASSIC

The Body of the Crime

by Wilbur Daniel Steele



Illustration by Ronald Chironna

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The house in which Daniel was born was the kind of which we say, as we drive past it in the elm-pillared margin of some New England village: "What a monstrosity!" One day, when the Antique has caught up with the Eighties, perhaps we shall say: "What a beauty! What noble bays and airy cupolas and richness of brown scrollwork! They knew how to build their houses in those days."

Perhaps, too, we shall have matured enough to say of men like Dan Kinsman, who was Daniel's father: "They knew how to build their lives."

When the young Daniel came home from his first year away to prep school and saw with his changed eyes the unchanging house, the weighing cornices and flying towers, squared bays, rounded bays, porte-cochere, all cocoa brown in the shadows of the chest-nuts—

"That's it," he thought, "it's not like other fellows' houses."

And when he studied this man, his father, it seemed for a while he had found the answer to the riddle as old in its secret wretchedness as the very beginnings of his memory. "And *he*, he's not like other fellows' fathers."

Other fellows' fathers, Daniel had found in his year, were men who arrived cheerfully from lifting their incomes and departed grimly to lower their medal scores. Forward-moving, tomorrow-thinking young elders, eager, industrious, mobile fellows fearful of nothing but of seeming to stand still.

But here was a father apparently content to be one year where he had been the year before, possessed of but the same possessions, the same small-town friendships, the same leisurely, half-patriarchal judgment, the same pedestrian pleasures, books and dogs, pruning hooks and garden hoes and fishing rods. And he a strong, straight man alive, not yet fifty, with black hair thick on his head, and lungs to laugh with when he wanted. Strange!

Now it came to Daniel it must be because his father was so wanting in—that's to say, so strange this way—that he had always seemed to his son so—so—Daniel groped for a word for a thing he'd never been able to give a shape or name, and had to finish lamely—seemed so "strange."

Daniel could have laughed for joy to discover, now he was grown up, that the trouble about his father was so little a one as this. For all the weight of his fifteen years, he could have skipped for lightness, to know that here was a difference from other fathers he now could grasp, even learn to condone, yes, even admire, even fight

for, with fellows with more—well—say—money-grabbing dads.

Yes, Daniel could have skipped for lightness on the deep cave-green turf of the hydrangea alley, where they walked and talked that first June afternoon at home, he and his father, while Mother watched them with her pale smile from her long chair in her high window.

It was curious; Daniel had always loved his ailing, beautiful mother, easily, and been near her and told her everything tellable, easily, and not thought much about it. The one he would have given his life to be able to love as easily, to be close to, friends with, whole of heart, was this other, this darkly handsome man whom he himself was so absurdly like to look at, his father.

So today it was as if the year of forgetting had worked a good miracle. It was a dream come true to find himself sauntering and chatting with Dan Kinsman as affectionately at ease as though they had been but two fellows gravely estimating the apple yield in the west yard, and the hay chances in the back mowing, chuckling together over the antics of Spot's pups on the barn floor, waving answer to the view halloo of Doc Martin racketing by in the antique twin-six, and, wonder of wonders at last, arm in arm, man and man, marching indoors prepared to mount and demand of Mother if supper were ever to be ready—as if she, poor fragile chatelaine, could know anything about that.

But, day of marvels! An elixir must have run in the air. For here in their sight came Mother down the stairs to meet them, walking by herself, suddenly, subtly revived, the flush on her cheeks and the shine in her eyes not more for their astonishment than for her own.

So tonight there were three at table in place of two, and it was like the sort of dream in which one wakes from an interior nightmare to find everything finished that was horrid, and everything at its beginning that is right and bright. Nor did it end with the supper table; afterward she would go out abroad with them, as if greedy to share in the marvel of those two men of hers who walked of a sudden as one, and by their walking so, seemed so suddenly to have made her walk again.

What a sight it was for the evening sun to see, level and bloody rose beneath the eaves of the chestnuts! Dan Kinsman, bemused, commencing words and swallowing their ends on half-choked chuckles, even as his eyes, quick for once, kept slant track of Vivian's every oddly exuberant gesture. Daniel, beatified; accepting wonders with a new omnivorous trust. And Vivian Kinsman, un-

believable, a princess freed from some evil enchantment in exile, returned to her kingdom, leading them.

In the east yard, hidden for years, the low, excited laugh was on her lips continuously. For this border, it was: "They're too gorgeous, Dan; I love them!" For that bed: "But there never *is* such flowers!" When she came in view of Father's season's pride, the bastion of man-high crimson poppies, all she could do was put her hands to her heart.

Only when she caught sight of Spot and her puppies taking the last of the sun at the barn door was there a shadow of change in the exclamation of discovery.

"You're going to keep them all, Dan!" She drew Father's eyes. "All, Dan!"

He would have temporized, laughingly: "Spot got away this time, and—"

"You're not going to drown them, Dan. I couldn't bear to think—"

The sharpness in her voice brought quickness to his.

"Why, no, of course not, Vivian. I shall keep them, of course—unless someone should want them very much—who'd give them a good home."

The sun touched distant woods. Father dared worry aloud at last.

She turned back with a queer, mercurial docility, asking only, when they came to the porch steps, that she might have some of the crimson poppies for her room tonight.

"I should so love to see them in the morning, Dan, just three or four."

"You'll have an armful, that's what you'll have, dear; I'll go and get them now."

Daniel took her in on his arm, feeling tall, now his father was gone. She would go only as far as the living room for the moment, where a slender summer fire was laid, ready for the match. When Daniel had lighted it he studied the white figure lying back deep in Dan Kinsman's chair. He said: "You're happy tonight, Mother."

She needn't answer. Her eyes, fixed on the fire, were alight with all its beginning, playing flames. And before he knew why, "Have you always been happy here with Father," he demanded, "and with me?"

This must have seemed to need no answer, at first. But then she sat up and fixed the boy with her straight gaze. "Always, yes!" From vehemence it changed to mirth. "What ever put it in your head, sonny?—yes, yes, yes!" And sinking back, with a little gasp at the end of her laughter: "He's an angel, sonny, your father is,

but he's an awful slow-poke; won't you go and hurry him along?"

Father had meant it when he said an armful; he had gathered a whole great sheaf of the poppies, and rather a pity, for the blooms were closed. But what matter if Vivian wanted them; they'd open again at day. So he seemed to be thinking as he stood there, laden and bemused, in the falling night.

And so it was that Daniel, his son, came upon him, deep in a preoccupation of his own, halted a rod away, and, without lifting his gaze from the ground, said: "Has Mother liked it here in Kenelbridge, Father?"

Dan Kinsman had had a day of astonishments. Without turning anything but his head, and that slowly, he studied his dim questioner.

"It has liked your mother here," he said quietly.

The boy, given a riddle, raised his eyes to the man, who was no more than a shadow shape in the dusk now—and, as shadows may be, something distorted and magnified—between the blackening blood of the poppies he carried and the dike he had torn them from. And Daniel forgot his riddle and widened his eyes. The father knew the sign of old. All afternoon he had been waiting for it, pulled between dread and the beginnings of an incredible hope. Now he wheeled, cried, "Ah, Daniel, son!" and held out his arms, careless of their sanguinary burden. And his son turned and ran.

What good is it to be fifteen and a man, instead of ten and a boy, or five and a child? When Daniel, fleeing, needles in his legs and an icicle up his backbone, reached the firelight where he had left his mother sitting, it was on the knees of veriest childhood he tumbled down, to hide his face in the chair bottom beside her, wind his fingers in her skirts, and sob it out in words aloud, at last:

"Mother—why am I—why am I sometimes—sometimes so fr-fr-frightened of my—my fa-fa-father?"

Mother had always answered his questions, till he asked this question. Her failure now, her complete, unstirring silence, doubled the magnitude of a terror till now his own shamed secret. And the doubled was redoubled by the sound of that man's feet on the piazza, coming toward the door.

He groveled. "Mother, please, hurry—hurry and tell me, tell me, Mother! What—what's there about my father—what's he done that's such a—horror?"

Still, for answer, no word, no gesture. And it was too late; a quiet door had opened and the feet were in the room. As Daniel scrambled up and wheeled, a defending courage suffused him. He stood his

ground, and, not knowing why, spread his arms across the man's way, and not knowing what, cried: "No! Don't! Don't come!"

Through the water in his eyes he began to see his father's face hung there before him, oddly gray, the stare of it fixed, not on him, but on her behind him. And he grew aware of two things fighting in that stare, the greater one like a stunned sorrow, the lesser like a reawakening hope.

As sometimes in crisis, it was of the lesser one the man spoke now.

"This, then, Daniel, is why you said what you said out there, and sobbed, and ran away back here? It wasn't that old queerness of yours coming back then, after all?"

The husband's shock was gentler than the son's, for all evening he had had in his mind as he watched Vivian the thought of a candle when it gutters, how it will flame to its old brightness for an instant at the last.

Not so with Daniel. When he turned and knew that the reason his mother had sat there and not answered him was that all the while she had sat there in the deep chair dead, he fainted.

Doc Martin had to mop his bald head with a troubled handkerchief many times in the following days. On the third, the afternoon after the funeral, stopping in at the Kinsmans' by right of the oldest and closest friend and finding Dan there all alone, he asked: "Where's Daniel hiding himself?" And if it sounded casual, and was meant to, already in the soil of the doctor's mind uneasy little roots of wonder had begun to set.

"Don't know; not far off, I guess." The answer was given with an averted face.

Why shouldn't it be? Men's faces, when they've just buried their wives of twenty years—why may they not wish to keep what's written on them to themselves? The physician mocked himself for a worrying idiot as he went on home.

But he had his head to mop again when he got to his own house and found Daniel fidgeting up and down the piazza, inarticulate and miserably mantling. It was all mysterious and awkward. He didn't know what he was to do or say, and especially was this so when the boy's dumbness, laboring, brought forth some mouse of words about the weather or the baseball standings. But finally, "Dr. Martin," it came at a rush, "was my mother happy, living here in Kennelbridge, with Father—and me?"

It is unfortunate that at such moments men seem to think they

have to speak in the manner of oracles. As Dan Kinsman, three days before, now Doc Martin:

"Well, son, she *lived* here in Kennelbridge, with you and your father, almost exactly ten years longer than I gave her to live. Does that mean anything?"

And thereafter he wondered why the boy's eyes, savagely troubled, followed him slantwise everywhere. He wondered more. Seeing the sun go and the dusk come, he wondered why the sensitive, naturally unobtrusive lad stayed on, apparently aimless and plainly wretched, and stayed, and made no move to go. It was after dark when Doc Martin appeared at the Kinsman place, to find Dan out in the east yard, standing, chin down, hands locked behind him.

"I thought, Dan, you might wonder where the kid was. He's over at my house. I'm afraid I've been—uh—keeping him."

Dan listened, stock-still, without comment. It became an ordeal.

"I don't know just how to say it, Dan. The boy seems badly upset. He has a lot of his mother in him, Dan—a lot of the thing that made us all love her—and—want to spank her, sometimes. That sentimental defenselessness—it went with her ailment, I've no doubt. That making a mountain of emotion out of a molehill of—not that I mean this is a molehill—but—damn it, old man! The boy—this house—this night after the funeral—I've a hunch he'd more than half like to stay over with me. Thought I'd ask you."

"Yes."

The one syllable, it sounded rough in the throat. As he went away the doctor turned twice to study the figure posted there in darkness, head heavy, face hidden. Anger? Sorrow? What? Headless, tailless business! He told himself he wished he were dead and well out of it.

He wasn't. After that night, any half plans there may have been of father and son going off for a summer of travel together were dropped. There was a camp in the Green Mountains where Daniel's school went, and he was packed for it by the second morning. Dan came to Doc Martin, unhappy, unused to lying.

"I wonder if you'll do something for me, old man? Drive Daniel over to the main line this noon. I shall be busy."

The doctor did it. What their parting was he never knew, for the boy had his bags out at the gate when he drove by, and the father was "busy." If the friend of them both was profanely troubled he kept it quiet and set himself for a gallant hour of cheer and small talk. The problem of a book for the journey seemed a godsend. They

went over the newsstand's library with a mutual pretense of care, but as if it were not bad enough that all the novels were detective novels, Daniel discovered after brief browsings that there was none he could be certain he hadn't read. As he accepted one at last—entitled *Murder!*—the physician had to stare.

"Lord, son! To look at you anybody'd think you were as mild as a lamb. And here you turn out a glutton for crime. Don't you ever read anything else?"

Daniel went red—even redder, the doctor thought, than was asked for.

"Oh, I forget 'em faster'n I read 'em. If you asked me one single thing that had happened, a week after, I couldn't any more remember it than I could—"

He got no further. He had touched by chance on a pet dogma of the other's; and Doc Martin, figuratively, squared off.

"Couldn't remember? Bosh! Ever tried?"

"Tried?" Daniel was confused by this vehemence.

"Really tried, I mean. Rolled up your mental sleeves and taken pick and spade to the humus of memory, to try and turn up some one particular thing that's buried there? It's surprising. There are authenticated records of long-term prisoners, men in solitary confinement, who, simply for something for their minds to do . . ."

And here they came, the classic cases, served up with a zealot's gusto; the aged criminals reconstructing verbatim the nursery tales of infancy; the old fellows repainting in minutest detail places passed through as children and thereafter wholly forgotten. And so forth. And so on.

The man with a hobby is not to be held accountable. Doc Martin, who had toiled to make talk—now his one fear was that the belated train would make up time.

"Can't remember! Actually, you can't *forget!* Nothing you've ever felt, heard, seen, no matter how tiny—you may mislay the record, but you can't lose it. No matter how dim, it's here in your cranium somewhere, indelible, forever."

The bent ear and big eye of his audience it was cruel to give up. The train was in, but there was still the moment on the platform.

"Theoretically, Daniel, you ought to be able to remember the day of your birth. But it would probably take you as many as a thousand years, in a dark cell, and after all—"

After all, after the boy was up the step Doc Martin recollected something he had been two days thinking on.

"Daniel, listen! Your mother *was* happy. Her life here was a

clear, quiet, happy life, with those she loved deeply. Believe me, Daniel."

It was good for Daniel he had the book called *Murder!* At the end of his emotional tether he must have escape, and the surest escape was here between these covers; he knew the taste of it beforehand, as the eater of drugs knows the taste of his drug. Escape, yes. And a curious, helpless, rather horrid surrender.

Never remember? "Bosh!" For a little while yet he left the book unopened, and thought of the mild old doctor and his ferocious expletive. But was it true, even a half of what he had claimed, about digging up buried things? . . . If you tried hard enough? . . . Took a pick and spade . . . to buried things?

There were five hours to ride, more than enough for the book. Let it wait.

To remember things forgotten! By dim footprints in the mold of old fantasies, by broken twigs of sensation—this sort of sound disliked for no reason, that odor as inexplicably agreeable—by clues so thinner-than-air to be able to track back relentlessly—what?

"Bosh!" It was Daniel's own bosh this time. But the light in the deeps of his abstracted eyes burned no less steadily, nor did the color of a strange excitement retreat from his cheeks and temples.

There was a station. Express, the train only slowed, going through. On the flickering platform stood an elderly woman, back to, a stoutish figure glimpsed for a split second, gray-clad, with a purple hat with a tulle quill.

"Emma!"

But then the boy lay back and derided himself. It was that purple, forward-tilted hat. Emma, his old nurse, had been dead three—no, two—years. It was three years ago she came to see him, from Albany, and that was the year before she died.

Yes, yes. She came in her nephew's car and brought Daniel a sweater she had knitted for him. He could see her now, when he tried to get into it, there on the big circular side piazza, and her chagrin. "Mercy, when I was here last I never looked to see you grow so in two years. Remember when I was here last time, Dannie?"

"Course I do; what d'you think? And you said I used to be a caution when I was little, and you hoped I'd got over it."

"Bless you, Dannie, and have you?"

Had he? Got over what? Three years ago he'd known what, because three years ago he'd remembered what she'd said two years before that. Something about: "I declare, you always were a cau-

tion, Dannie. The first day ever I saw you . . . saw you . . . first day ever I saw you . . .”

Concentrate on it! Try harder!

“ . . . first day ever I saw you, do you know what you said . . . what you . . .”

In the Pullman, but unconscious of the Pullman, Dannie knotted his brows.

Don't give up. Go at it some other way. . . .

Well, they'd been in his room; he was ready for bed, and Emma had come up—she'd stayed overnight that next-to-last visit—and she'd sat there in the blue rocker and talked and talked. Talked so long that Mother had called: “Daniel, Emma's tired, so you must stop asking her so many . . .”

But now he *had* it—the other thing—it was “question.”

It wasn't “what you said.” It was, complete: “First day ever I saw you, do you know *the question you asked me*? Well, most three-year-olds, they'll ask you like, ‘What's a zebra?’ or ‘What's a airplane?’ But the first thing you asked me was . . . thing you asked me was . . .”

No, after all, not quite complete. Why did the light of recollection close again, just there? Especially when, by thinking on it, that bedtime visit of Emma's had grown as vivid as a thing today.

The expression of the boy in seat No. 5 was a set scowl. A flush colored it, like anger. A “Bosh!” trembled on his lips. He had a book to read, and, by hang, he'd read it now. A book called *Murder!* “Murder!”

Why, now he'd got that too!

“The first thing you asked me—I was trying to get you to go into the summerhouse and you were howling and pulling—and you asked me, ‘What is murder?’ And if you don't call that funny for a three-year-old to be asking . . .”

Murder? Three-year-old? Funny? . . . But leave those, for the moment.

Summerhouse! Latticework, probably. Light through it in squares or diamonds, probably. Unless—ugh, it was chilly in the Pullman—there were vines. Vines?

The train carried the corporeal weight of Daniel Kinsman to the White River Junction that summer afternoon. But the part of him that weighed nothing at all had started on an immensely longer journey, an incalculably stranger quest.

At camp, for the first while, they let him go his own gait, without nagging him or themselves. Aware of his shocking loss, they even

let down the rules a little—rules, fundamentally, of good fellowship—in his case. Daniel, with his shut mouth, little appetite, and eyes fixed habitually on nothing, was no good fellow for anyone.

This was all right for a certain period. But when a week and another week had gone, and a normal youngster should have been getting some hold on healthy life, and Daniel was still not less separate, but if anything more so, physically torpid, colorless of expression, unmistakably if incomprehensibly not among those present, the responsible began to think of doing something about it.

At length the Head sat down and wrote a letter to the boy's father, who had shut up house on Doc Martin's plea and gone off with him to the Canadian woods. But that letter was destined not to be posted. Before a stamp was on it, word came in that young Kinsman had not been seen since lights-out the night before. At the end of a day and night of combing the woods, beating the hills, a telegram was despatched to Canada.

Locked, bolted, and shuttered though the house was, Daniel knew a boy's way into it. One of the cellar windows was loose enough to let a lock-pick wire in.

Of all that Daniel had done, of all he was yet to undertake, this one act was the hardest. That he could, in the night, enter into that sealed, empty, pitch-black habitation, of which anyone might be nervous—and he, with his mother dead and his imagination whipped keen by a fortnight's flagellation, was horribly, icily afraid—given the measure of the thing that was stronger than the house's terror, its pull.

If he were only in the house, only on the scene there, only at home! Day by day, night by night, the brown house of home had kept the dragline taut on him, by innuendo, by promise, by command. Whenever a peephole, opened in memory, had closed again before the glimpsed stage could set itself with half the properties of old actuality, "Ah, yes, but if you were *there* it might be different," something had seemed to whisper.

And now that he was here? Now that he was actually in, his feet weighting on sightless stairs, hands guiding him along blind walls? Now what was he to do?

Nothing. When he had reached his own room, at the end of gropings that brought sweat out of his neck, he pawed for his bed, found it, and laid himself down along the middle of the mattress. There, inert—almost as inert for hours at a time as a cataleptic—he remained. How long?

By calendar it came to four days. In his consciousness the lapse of time was not measurable, it was as well a dream's forty winks as a dungeon's forty years.

Of his rare actual moves he was to all intents unconscious. Luckily it was summer, and the water not turned off; from time to time he drank. Once he bolted raw oatmeal from a box in the pantry and was ill with it. The electric current was cut, but there was the oil lantern he might have lighted long before he did, had he cared. Rather, perhaps had he dared. Perhaps, more simply, had he felt the need. After all, his eyes were no longer concerned with this shuttered Here and Now.

They were concerned with the half-open door of a summerhouse.

Relatively, it may have been little more than a scratching of the topsoil; actually, in that blank-eyed fortnight away at camp, he had penetrated a surprising depth into the leaf mold of his fallen memories. Most important, he had caught the trick of it, learned the heft and balance of his tools, pick and spade, a dogged mental concentration working at one with a reserveless mental surrender.

So it had become child's play, literally, by fastening on some fag end of sensuous recollection—a barked shin of escapade, sting of a punishment, taste of the sweetmeat of some reward—to restore the outlines of whole episodes in the comparatively recent years of his sixes, fives, even his fours; to relive whole days, repeople whole scenes with shapes, and watch these phantasmal beings take on identities and lineaments—and lo! Auntie Prichard, of course, the doughnut woman! Or Mary Belle—who could forget the girl with wire on her teeth!

He had learned a lot about the creature of pranks and bush beatings that is the mind. He learned, at a price, that no lead can be too paltry to follow. So it was, retrieving a boy's face plastered with freckles and banged with red hair, he had given three long hours of his last camp morning to trying to find the face a name. A dozen times he nearly had it; the muscles of his tongue knew the feel of it, yet couldn't get the sound. It made him mad. "I won't give it up, not if it takes all day!"

And, "day," there it was. Georgie Day! Who could forget Georgie Day?

Accident? In the weird business Daniel was about, there's no such thing.

Georgie Day. Well, well! Immediately, fruitless hours fruited magically. A house suddenly sprang up around the freckled rascal, and around the house a tin-can-littered yard, and in the yard a

tumbling barn, and in the barn, rabbits.

Rabbits? What about rabbits? Look! Here's a rabbit running, bounding high with fright across a greensward in sunshine. No, none of Georgie's; he and his have vanished from the scene. This is a wild one, cottontail, surprised among berry bushes behind the hoe garden, retreat cut off, scuttling across the west lawn for all its worth, and Daniel running after it.

Run, cottontail! Run, boy! Bounce, bunny! Whoop, Dannie!

"Here, Daisy! Where are you, Daisy? Where's that dog?"

Daisy? Why, Spot's mother, of course, elderly, sleepy, all setter-red.

Yellow sunshine, green grass, little wild blue shadow, hunting, praying, for some hole. And a hole, a hole at last! Squarish aperture among massed leaves. Dive for it, bunny! Stop, boy! Into it, rabbit! Boy, stop dead! Don't go near there, youngster! Frown if you please, stamp, mutter; yes, you know you don't want to go near there. You know you don't.

Why not?

Pandemonium. Out comes rabbit, out comes Daisy, the lazy, surprised asleep in there. And the two of them, fleeing, pursuing, flicker past the transfixed Dannie, and away, into limbo. For it's the squarish aperture in massed woodbine leaves, crosshatch of lattice in their gaps, lattice door ajar—it's this he's staring at.

So it was, by uttering the irrelevant words "if it takes all day," Daniel had found the way back to the summerhouse.

Two weeks it had taken him to reach its viny exterior, those two weeks away at camp. Had he had a hundred years, real ones, in place of the hundred hours he could command, who knows but that he might actually have succeeded in covering the rest of the journey—might have crept or leaped at last across that one remaining rod of grass, gravel, and doorsill, and been inside?

Now he started sanguinely. Only a rod left—the last dash—home stretch. Pooh! Thrown back from it, confused, he started again with the same assurance, only again to be set on his heels by a wall, impalpable as air, but impenetrable as glass. How many times did he relaunch the attack? In one hour of the clock he could live a score in recollection, a hundred toward the end, when hunger and fever had whipped the pace. No longer sanguinely, but desperately, he tried one breach after another.

For now there were several; he had multiplied his points of attack. To the rabbit day he had added quickly the Emma day. It was no task by now to reconstruct that episode entire. He could

commence with the breakfast table, where the new nurse was first introduced into the scheme of his cosmos. He could mount then to his room with her, suffer the change into denim play pants, come down, come out, and go towing around the yard at her arm's end, dazzled by the sudden wealth of her "What shall we play? Anything on earth you like, Dannie?"

So, not, once, but dozens of times, he came to the spot where something in him balked, he began to howl, cleared Emma's grasp, let her go on. He could see her face in all its mystification now—and see it, more was the wonder, across the width of the rod he couldn't cross—in the doorway of the summerhouse. And he could hear her expostulating still:

"What is it, Dannie? Nothing but a toad here. You're not afraid of a toad!"

And he could feel something in his stomach's pit, that came up, and was words.

"What is murder, Emma?"

Why on earth that? What was it in him, cold and hot—not shame, not rage, not terror, alone, but like a misery of all three compounded? Or like the feeling Daniel had to this day, immensely diluted, whenever anyone in his hearing spoke of cycles or sickles or Seckles.

And, coming to that, why on earth that? Did it all come from "Seckle"? And did that come from the pear tree, down past the east corner of the barn, which, since he was recollecting, he recollected he had never liked? Recollected, in fact, that when they used to play hide-and-seek at his house, and Daniel himself was "it," and one of the boys hid behind that Seckle pear below the barn, he wouldn't go there to spy him, not if he stayed "it" forever.

So? Why wouldn't he? Time and time again he made an effort to follow that trace, but it was of no use; there was nothing there that was important, he had to tell himself; much better buckle down to business with the shovel day.

The shovel day he had added to the rabbit day and the Emma day now. Where it came in the chronology he couldn't say; though he judged from the longer time it had taken him to dig it out it must have been earlier. At any rate, it was the farthest back he could remember being frightened by his father.

He had to work on it. Again, again, stubbornly again, he would stand in a flushed twilight on the perimeter of that arc whose radius was a rod, and watch the woodbine leaves put aside, and see his father emerge from the dark interior, carrying a spade.

Well, what about it? What so fearful was his father doing? Going gardening, probably, in the evening's cool; tools may have been kept in the summerhouse. So, what? Look more deeply into this! But try as Daniel would, he couldn't. Each time, at sight of man and shovel, the child gulped, turned, ran, with goblins grabbing after him, for the house and Mother.

Why? Why, oh, why, oh, why?

And now at last, time lost all count of—grown to months and years, it seemed, in the black house—now at last, let down by the caving of the body beneath it, Daniel's mind began to surrender to exhaustion. Daylight—what was actually the fourth daylight—creeping through the shutter cracks in slim fans of grayness, did not waken him for a long time from the sleep into which he had sunk near midnight.

When it did he failed to fall immediately, as his habit was, into his reminiscent reverie. Lying supine, staring at the ceiling, it was the ceiling he saw this morning. He raised himself on the mattress, intending to go downstairs, but with the act a dizziness took hold of him. He lay back again and listened to his teeth knocking together. It is one thing for a man, adult and idle, to starve himself for a while; for a growing boy it is another thing.

It was the first time there had been room in Daniel's brain for a thought of failure. Was it not possible that the end of the time he could hide and have solitude was approaching? No sooner the idea than he repelled it. With a strength of panic he drove himself back to his task. Dig or die, now!

But the pick and spade, till now so docile, developed the balkings and crotchets of a curious sabotage. Today, when he summoned the old face of a playmate, straightway the features began to twist in the weirdest fashion, magnify, diminish, like the grotesque faces that dissolve in dreams. Or, coming on a new trail of old adventure unexplored, he found it leading him into extraordinary places, out of all color with the rest of his past—and realized with a start that it was something he had read; not lived.

And presently, frustrated, he slept again.

Each other day had been an age; this was but a dozen blinks long, a day wasted. How could Daniel know the incalculable value of that day his mind lay fallow?

It was night once more when he arose, went into his mother's room, and lay down on the bed there. It was nearly, if not quite, somnambulism. Certainly he was unaware of any reason for the move. Whether he fell asleep and woke up, whether he slept at all,

or waked at all, whether at any time he was actually, bodily, in the summerhouse, it would be now impossible to say. It can only be said that the thing till the end had all the stigmata of true nightmare.

The will to terror, to begin with. Terror sprung of its own seed, an effect wanting a cause, a shadow condemned to create the object that casts it. And with this, alternately, a weightless, boundless mobility, and a sense of being held from moving, arms pinioned, legs bound.

Nothing was ever clear. Such moments as were lighted—less than pictures; mere rags of sight vignetted on the dark—were whisked away too quickly to be comprehended whole. Nor were these many. The pervading scene was a blackness in which blacknesses moved, giving forth but muffled sounds. Acts witnessed and no more, shadowy, separate, retreating rather than ever coming nearer.

"They're going away from the summerhouse, ma'am," or, "Carrying him away"—that adverb, "away," was forever recurring. And generally, somewhere near it, whether before or after, blacknesses moved on blackness with a black burden; heavy breathing, soft feet.

It must be understood there was never an attempt at sequence. No act revealed itself whole at any one time; at divers times divers fractions of it would repeat themselves, mingled with stray fractions of other acts or utterances.

Take the one set of sounds. Sometimes it ran, out there—door creak, oath, blow, scuffle. Sometimes quite reversed. Sometimes—oath, blow, scuffle, door creak.

And that querying cry, coming from close above, thrown down—out of a window?—into the dark, now it would be, "Dan, what are you doing? *Tom!*" Then, like as not, next time it would be: "Tom, what are you doing? *Dan!*"

It is impossible to tell it, by a tenth, adequately. For by the very mechanics of telling, nine tenths of the formlessness is lost; fragments, released from the peculiar bedevilment of nightmare, inevitably fly together. Detached words, fractional phrases, flickering by, flitting back again; before they can be written here they must needs have formed themselves by some degree into sentences, no matter if the sentences are forever changing something of the forms. As, for instance, in the one, "Dan (Tom), what are you doing?" followed by, "*Tom! (Dan!)*"

There's the other sentence, into which at last the word "murder"

has come. By the time it has crystallized itself into the sequence, "It was murder, Dan; I saw it; murder in cold blood!"—by that time the light around it has crystallized, too, in a pattern, a pattern of diamond-shaped pencils striking in through gaps of latticework. And the straitjacket of nightmare around one's limbs has taken the shape of the arms of the crier-out. And the crier-out is Mother.

"Don't come in that door; I'm afraid of you, Dan! The blood on your hands is blood of brutal murder. Why? Don't tell me. Was it because I loved him? I love my child, here in my arms. Must I be afraid for *him* then? Must he be afraid of his father, now, as long as the two of you live?"

And this cry, too, vibrant with hysteria, has a vision to go with it, a peephole vision of a close lantern, a red-flecked hand, a spade with earth spots on it, and the tight, white, terrible mask of Father's face.

So, in telling, already this big, close lantern light has extricated itself from the little lantern light at a distance. But in the dream, if it was a dream, this very separation of the two became from the first the thing, intuitively, the dreamer fought for. Wrestled for with tied hands, ran after with hobbled feet; cried to with stopped mouth.

In the beginning it was equally the one or the other that might start it; toward the end of an aeon a kind of rule was established; it was the little light far off that began, and the big one then, too soon, that came and swallowed it, only to be swallowed in its turn by that blackness with black things moving in it, or the door-creak sequence, containing the scuffle, the oath, and the blow.

Perhaps it was because of this that the desire of the boy's dread centered more and more fiercely on that weakling spark, and he told himself it was there that whatever was hidden was hidden, and awaited its recurrence impatient of the other shadow plays. And when it came, and the voice of the second woman in the bedroom—a nurse?—began, "It's digging they are, ma'am, down there—," and with that the light began to swell, irresistibly, and stripe itself in the pattern that meant the summerhouse, Daniel fought with all his bitter, puny power against the re-enwrapping arms, the relifting hysteria of Mother's "Don't come in that door! I'm afraid of you!" and the reopening peepshow of the red hand and the white face.

And he cried: "Yes, but go on with the other! Digging down *where*, down *where*?" till in the nightmare the lees of the sweat of his exhaustion ran in icy dribbles down his skin.

It was not till he gave up, beaten by weariness, that it suddenly gave in.

"It's digging they are, ma'am, down there under—"

"Under *what*?"

"—under that pear tree—"

"Pear tree?"

"—with the little pears, below the barn. By the light of the lantern, ma'am—"

Lantern! By the way, where is a lantern? Now, quick!

"—they're digging in the —"

Digging! Pick and spade? Where are they?

"—ground, burying something—"

A thing that is buried!

"—under the pear tree, ma'am."

Ever tried? Rolled up your sleeves, taken pick and spade—to turn up something that is buried there?

When Dan Kinsman and Doc Martin reached the house late that night, and found it black, the one last hope, which neither had dared to confess to, seemed to have followed all its fellows. Red-lidded with sleeplessness, jaws ill-shaven, clothing long worn, they looked the men they felt now, as, unlocking the front door, they went in.

"What's the good?"

It was the doctor that saw it, through one of the living room windows. "Hey! What's up out there? Somebody with a lantern, down there behind the barn."

They started out of the door at a walk, but then ran.

They found a lantern, a spade, and a garden mattock under the Seckle-pear tree, and a sprawling trench dug, and a weazen-faced, wide-eyed boy to his knees in it, holding out toward them two brown bones.

Dan spoke. "For God's sake, what are you doing here?"

Daniel spoke. "For God's sake, what are *these* doing here?"

Doc Martin spoke. "For God's sake!" That was all.

It wasn't that Dan was obstinate; it was simply that he was dazed. "What are you doing here, son? Tell me!"

It wasn't that Daniel was sullen; it was simply that his legs were going to go out from under him at any moment now.

"What are these, Father? You tell me!"

"Son—sonny—you're sick."

"I am sick. Who was Tom?"

"Good lord alive! Dan, look here! Be quiet, Daniel; wait till I get through with him. Dan, how long ago was it—I mean, how old would this kid have been, that night?"

"What night do you mean?"

"Come out of it, man! That night when you heard where Tom had been the week before, and called me, and I brought the chloroform over, thinking maybe, perhaps, the dog might—"

"Dog!" High in the roof of a boy's mouth, the one syllable, echoing.

"—and you, Dan, no maybe or perhaps about it, you got him in the head with the spade, thank God, in time. What I asked you; how old was Daniel then?"

"Not old enough to remember anything. . . . Daniel, who's been telling you—"

But Doc Martin wouldn't have it. "No, man, you talk to me. How old?"

"Two, perhaps. Not three. A baby. A babe in arms, actually, come to think of it. Vivian had him there in her arms."

"Where?"

"There in the summerhouse."

"Vivian—in the summerhouse?"

"Afterward. She—she had come there."

"You've never told me."

"No. I—it's something I—Look here, Daniel, son, you'd best be—"

"No you don't, Dan. Talk! What's this about Vivian and Daniel, and the summerhouse afterward? Tell it, and tell it straight."

"She was ill, that's all. Frightened. And—and you know how she was about animals and things—and she didn't understand. Couldn't expect her to, not knowing anything. Hysterical. Went to the summerhouse to see—and bolted herself in."

"But when you explained?"

"That's it. I was a fool, I suppose. I tried to lie, at first. The mastiff was hers, from a pup; she adored him; it was all so sudden; I couldn't bring myself to say the word—hydrophobia. A fool."

"Yes, and a damned one."

"She said she was afraid of me, Doc. She said it was—it was—"

"She said it was murder, Father. And—it was only—*Father!*"

"Son! Lord! What's the—Hey! Catch him, Doc, or he'll fall."

"Catch him yourself, he's yours. Pick him up, fool. Starvation; don't worry too much. Bring him along."

"But if he should come to, and me carrying him. I'm afraid—"

"Don't be. Not any more."

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon

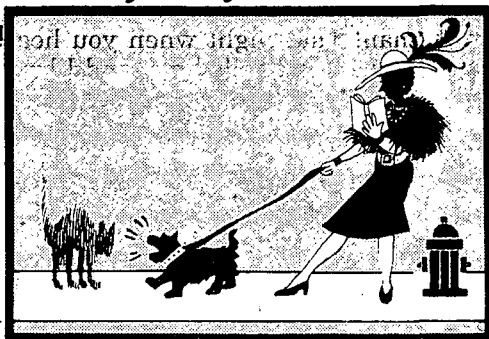


Illustration by Sheila Smith

Literature's most celebrated and beloved detective, Sherlock Holmes, plied his trade in Victorian England, and that very time and place continues to hold a fascination for mystery writers and their fans. It certainly adds much to Ray Harrison's **Why Kill Arthur Potter?** (Popular Library, \$2.95, 184 pp.), which offers us the successful Scotland Yard Detective-Sergeant Joseph Bragg, this time teamed up with a high-born constable. There's lots of period detail as the two try to untangle the net that surrounds the fatal gang beating of a lowly shipping clerk.

James Gollin has written a third mystery about the ingratiating little band of young musicians known as the Antiqua Players. **The Verona Passamezzo** whisks the group off to Verona, Italy, the site of a music festival, where they are scheduled to perform in their special area, preclassical music. But no sooner are rehearsals seriously under way than the group finds itself dancing to a different tune entirely, one that includes smuggling wine through the Iron Curtain, outwitting the Mafia, and escaping suspicion of murder. The characters are wholesome and likable, and the glimpses into the workaday world of professional musicians are gratifying, even if the plot demands more than the ordinary suspension of disbelief on the reader's part. (Doubleday Crime Club, \$12.95, 187 pp.)

Beyond This Point Are Monsters is one of Margaret Millar's novels being reissued in paperback as part of a series called the "Library of Crime Classics" (International Polygonics, Ltd., \$4.95, 213 pp.). Millar, who was married to the late Ross Macdonald for over forty years, wrote this suspense novel in 1970, and it's worth a new look by a new batch of readers. It is set in southern California, where a young woman, married only a short time before her new husband disappears, is suing to have him pronounced legally dead. He had gone out one night the year before and never returned, and Devon has given up hoping he will return. The story uses flashbacks to reveal gradually a picture of that fateful night, and the ending packs a surprising punch. Millar is a strong writer, subtle and sure in her characterizations, and the suspense is strong. One can readily see why Millar has been voted a Mystery Writers of America Grand Master.

E. V. Cunningham, known to readers of this column as the author of the series featuring the Nisei policeman, Masao Masuto, has just introduced a new hero. **The Wabash Factor** (a Delacorte Press Book, \$14.95, 253 pp.) marks the debut of New York City detective Harry Golding, aided in this case by his spunky Irish wife Fran. The plot's premise is intriguing: can someone be assassinating political figures, yet making each death look like an accident or even death by natural causes? If so, it would mean vast resources were involved, and an international plot. (If not, there would be no novel here.) But the fact that Golding is indeed onto something also takes this police novel and turns it into a suspense thriller with political overtones. That means high-wire tension and legitimate danger for our hero and his family, and the kind of whom-can-you-trust paranoia that usually marks espionage novels. If that combination of elements appeals to you, you're in luck, and Cunningham does nimbly mix genres here. Some readers, however, will have difficulty believing in the plot.

If you enjoy hard-hitting, nitty-gritty police tales (comparable to "Dirty Harry" movies, I'd say), then you should enjoy Richard Forrest's new novel. **Lark** is its name; it's also the name of the protagonist, a twenty-year police veteran with a reputation for being unforgiving on the streets. What may well be his last case (his boss is threatening to pull him in and assign him permanently to a desk job) turns out to be a grisly case of a serial killer, one who uses a van to carry out his bizarre torture-murders on young girls. This is not for the squeamish. Forrest gets graphic to underline the horror for the victims and the urgency of Lark's mission:

to locate, and stop, the bloodshed. There's a weird twist employing a very foul-mouthed disc jockey; and Forrest has provided the almost predictably hard-nosed Lark with a wonderful foil, a smart but unambitious policeman dedicated to his close, large family. A speedy read. (Signet, \$2.95, 256 pp.)

Joe Binney is a New York City detective, a bachelor, an ex-navy man, with a reputation for dogged honesty. He's also deaf, the result of an accident, and the narrator of **Die Again, Macready** by Jack Livingston. There's lots of action, and some very sharp characterizations in this story, which opens with the apparent suicide of a brilliant young actor's business manager. The death also means the disappearance of the actor's life savings, which puts him—coincidentally?—in a vulnerable position career-wise, and just at a time when he's inclined to decline a big lead in a schlocky nighttime TV soap series. Macready (the actor, who has borrowed his stage name from a nineteenth century stage actor) is a surprising and fresh character, and a fine complement to Binney. There are behind-the-scenes peeks into show biz and network TV (though Livingston is surely not showing representative scenes and characters . . . nahhh). There's some violence in *Die Again, Macready*, but there's also a lot of play given to the growing friendship between Binney and the young actor, as well as discussions about the actor's aims. And these reflections probably *are* pretty close to the truth, as lots of New York actors see it, anyway. (Signet, \$2.95, 253 pp.)

Henry Gamadge is author Elizabeth Daly's engaging amateur detective who is actually a New York bibliophile. In other words, Gamadge is an expert on old books, manuscripts, autographs, etc., a handy man to have around when one is trying to spot a forgery, for example. Anyway, in **Unexpected Night** (originally published here in 1940), Gamadge is on a short seaside holiday when he's introduced to a sickly young heir, Amberley Cowden, and the young man's traveling companions. The next morning the young man's body is found at the base of a cliff. It's being called an accident—but was it? And when did the death occur? That's vital, because a very, very large inheritance is at stake, and it may be more than enough motive for murder. Like Agatha Christie, Elizabeth Daly has devised a clever puzzle of a plot, and has peopled it with generally genteel folks and other recognizable types. They nicely inhabit the story without getting in the way of the tale. I'd guess that lovers of Agatha Christie's tales will appreciate those by Elizabeth Daly as well. (Bantam Books, \$2.95, 230 pp.)

Shed Light on Death is the third in a series by L. A. Taylor to feature J. J. Jamison, a young computer specialist whose hobby is being an investigator for CATCH, a group interested in establishing the authenticity of UFO sightings. So far, J. J. has managed to prove each claim to be a hoax. He's also stumbled over several corpses. It seems his "luck" is holding because his latest UFO investigation isn't exactly kosher, or so claims J. J.'s colleague, the arrogant Professor Cameron Rogers. Then Cameron Rogers is murdered, and once again J. J. finds himself investigating a murder rather than an alien space landing. Taylor gives us a likable hero and his wife, and several other supporting characters, and throws in some info on scientific research and UFO's. It all makes for a pleasant change of pace. (Walker and Company, \$14.95, 183 pp.)

Ellis Peters was the subject of a profile in these pages over a year ago. Her latest in paperback, **The Devil's Novice** (Fawcett Crest, \$3.50, 214 pp.), is yet another in the series starring Brother Cadfael, a twelfth century Benedictine monk in Shrewsbury, England. If you haven't met Cadfael—an ex-soldier and Crusader, now a vital man in his sixties and the abbey's herbalist and "doctor"—pick up this latest. Cadfael puzzles over the behavior of a young lord who's been admitted to the abbey as a novice. Then his friend Hugh, standing in for the local sheriff, discovers the disappearance of a priest-emissary and a link to the boy's sudden "vocation." But Cadfael believes the lad is sheltering someone, even when the corpse of the missing man turns up and it's obvious that robbery wasn't the motive. As always, Peters carefully draws her characters against a detailed period backdrop, all accompanying a neatly structured and cleverly wrought mystery.



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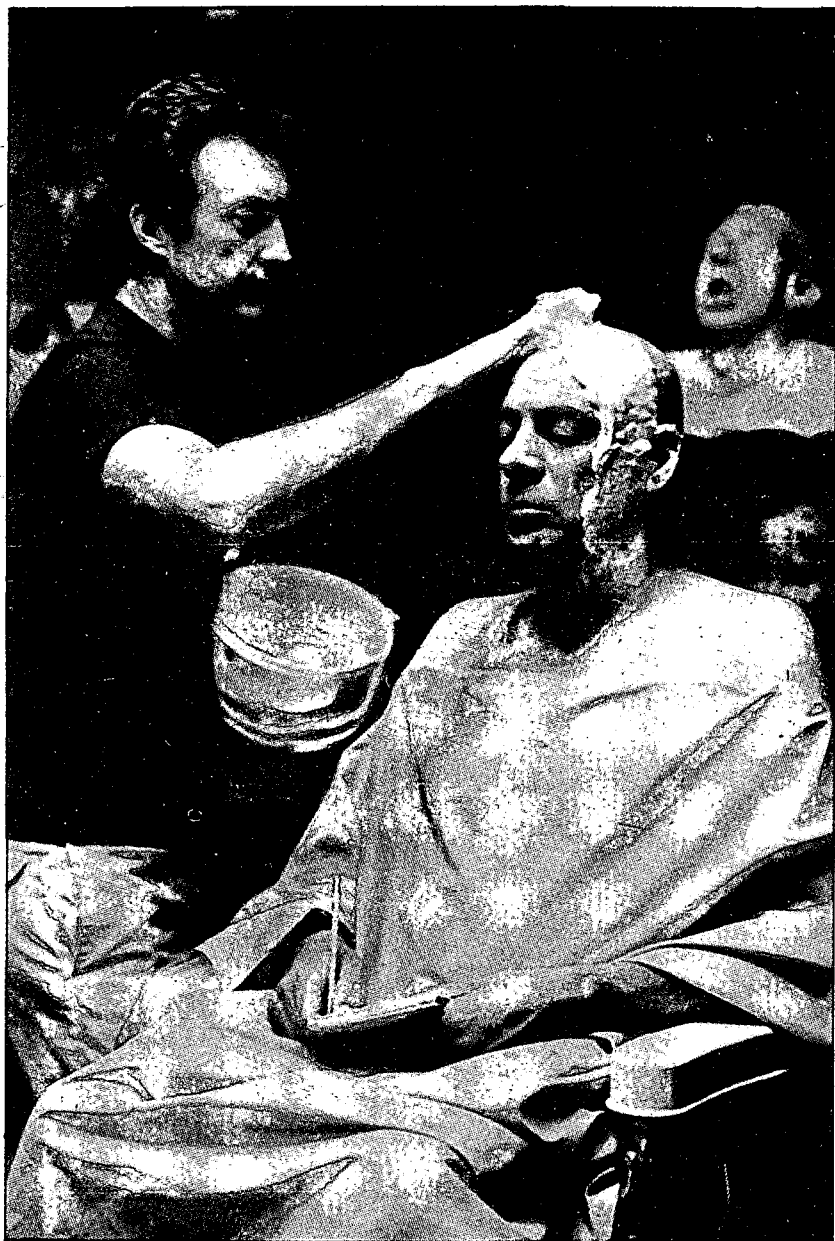
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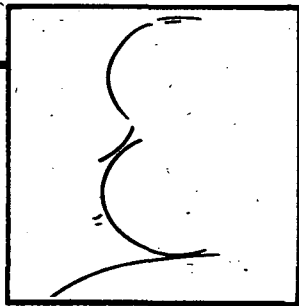
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Rollie Tyler, played by Bryan Brown, preparing the mafioso, played by Jerry Orbach, for his mock assassination.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



The title *F/X* derives from the movie business's designation for special effects. Rollie Tyler is a special effects technician who agrees to stage a mob rubout for the Justice Department's Witness Relocation Program. The department has a mafioso who has just given evidence against organized crime, and it wants him believed dead before he is spirited away to a new life.

Tyler sets up a restaurant shooting very much like the one with which *F/X* opens—a realistically shot scene that turns out to have been rigged by Tyler for a movie company. In both setups "squibs" are employed to simulate what are known in the trade as "bullet hits." The squibs are tiny, smokeless explosive charges

that can be set off by batteries wired to an actor's body, or by radio control. "Hits" are similar charges, minus the fake blood, that are implanted in walls and electronically detonated to simulate the impact of machine gun bullets.

The juxtaposition of similar special effects in the two scenes achieves an interesting play on illusion and reality. First the audience witnesses a brutal murder that is only an illusion. Then we watch the steps by which Tyler implants squibs and otherwise prepares the mafioso, played by Jerry Orbach, for the fake assassination. This shooting, which one views with a nearly professional eye, paradoxically proves to be even more convincing than the first. And in fact Tyler, who himself

wields the gun, comes to believe that he has been duped into committing a real murder with real bullets. Soon afterward, when Tyler's girlfriend is shot by a high-powered rifle, the squibs on her chest and back, simulating a bullet passing through her body, do not seem at all like makebelieve.

By this point, Tyler realizes that he was the intended victim of his employers at the Justice Department. And, indeed, they are out to kill him to insure that there are no "loose ends," as they put it. For the remainder of the movie Tyler is on the run in what proves to be, except for the special effects, a replay of Robert Redford's *Three Days of the Condor*.

Enter the police in the oversized person of detective Leo McCarthy, imposingly played as a tough but honest, no-nonsense New York cop by Brian Dennehy, who played the more sinister New York cop in *Gorky Park*. McCarthy, of course, wants Tyler for the murder of the mafioso, who may or may not actually be dead.

Appropriately, Tyler evades the authorities and works his way to the bottom of the mystery by assuming some of his own disguises and employing a range of his own special effects. The disguises include a good old fashioned false beard, a putty

nose, and a wig. Much of Tyler's equipment comes from the blood and gore horror movies he has worked on—one of them titled *I Dismember Mama*. Tyler's inexhaustible bag of tricks serves him well, but not without steering *F/X* around a sharp curve from tight suspense to a familiar, less compelling action format complete with car chase.

In principle there is nothing wrong with resolving a mystery movie through action; Hitchcock did it all the time. But if one recalls *The Lady Vanishes*, for example, which winds up with a shootout and escape by speeding train, there is an obvious difference. Hitchcock always worked to maintain a consistency of tone and continuity of characterization. In contrast, as Tyler is placed in ever greater danger, the tone of *F/X* illogically goes from intense seriousness to flippant jocularity.

As both killers and cops move in on Tyler, and he moves in on the heavily body-guarded author of his woes, Tyler grows positively lighthearted, employing his special effects and special equipment as a series of James Bond-like sight gags. With a bit more restraint on the part of the movie makers, *F/X* could have been special for more than just its effects.

THE STORY THAT WON



The January Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by Cherie Ann Haeger of Erie, Pennsylvania. Honorable mentions go to Mark Truman of Midway City, California; Benjamin H. Foreman of Manchester, Connecticut; Shirley Lawrence Steele of Grinnell, Iowa; Patrick Forgette of Seattle, Washington; Lynn Westerhout Cutler of Don Mills, Ontario, Canada; Willie Rose of Antioch, California; Gail J. Toerpe of Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Anna L. Stewart of North Augusta, South Carolina; Rosemary Duba of Clarkston, Washington; Michael C. McPherson of Fort McMurray, Alta, Canada; and David Beckman of New York, New York.

THE BLITZEN CAPER by Cherie Ann Haeger

What's a high-flying reindeer to do when he's fired? I worked for Claus for years hauling dolls, sleds, puzzles; then he dumped me. All part of the law of supply and demand. Kids no longer believed in the Old Duffer. He had to cut back on personnel.

Still, how was I going to survive? As I watched the elves bowl, I thought: Why not go to Pittsburgh; open a bowling alley and detective agency. Figured a high-flying reindeer would have an edge in the surveillance business. The bowling alley would be my office.

At first it was a bit of a trip for the locals to frequent a bowling alley, let alone hire a detective agency, run by a real, fast-talking buck; but they got used to it. Began to grill me about life up at the Pole. I regaled them with stories; hung up some snaps of Claus & Co. Business was good.

One Christmas Eve I was hanging out at my place, Blitzen's Bowling Alley. Donder flew in. The Fat Man was in trouble. Kids believed in him again. I was to blame. Seeing is believing: The kids had seen me, the snaps, and believed. Now the Old Man had a load too heavy for seven tiny reindeer. He needed an eighth.

I felt like letting him stew in his own Christmas pudding. But you know what it's like with us tough guys—under our rough, tough exteriors are tender harts.

Photo by Berenice Abbott. Reprinted by permission of the Berenice Abbott Collection.

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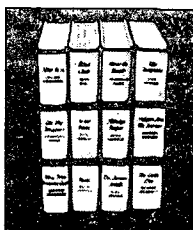
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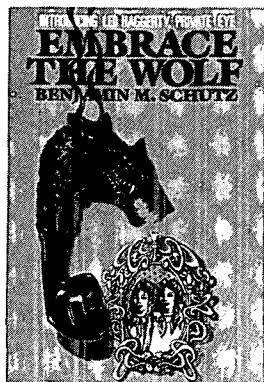
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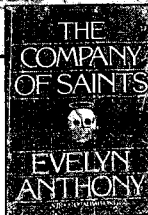
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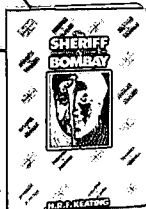
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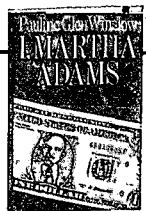
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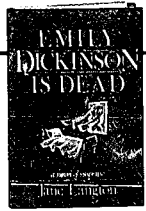
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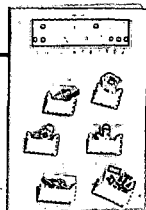
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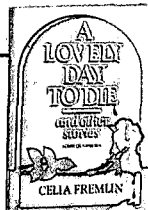
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